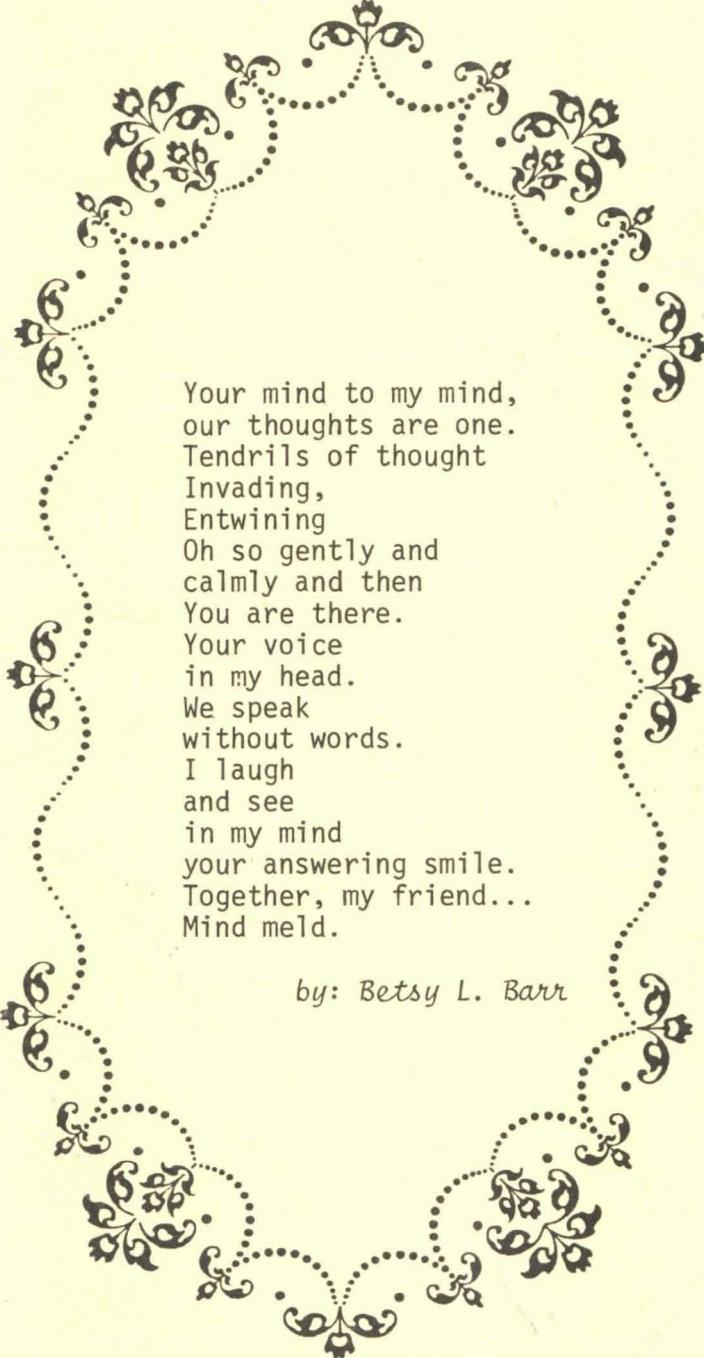


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Your mind to my mind,
our thoughts are one.
Tendrils of thought
Invading,
Entwining
Oh so gently and
calmly and then
You are there.
Your voice
in my head.
We speak
without words.
I laugh
and see
in my mind
your answering smile.
Together, my friend...
Mind meld.

by: Betsy L. Barr

MIND MELD

Sandy Zier

editors

Michelle Holmes

"One day soon, man is going to be able to harness incredible energy ... Energy that could ultimately hurl men to other worlds in some sort of spaceship. And the men that reach out into space will be able to find ways to feed the hungry millions of the world, and to cure their diseases. They'll be able to find a way to give each man hope and a common future. And those are the days worth living for."

Edith Keeler
The City on the Edge of Forever



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Columbia, MD 21044

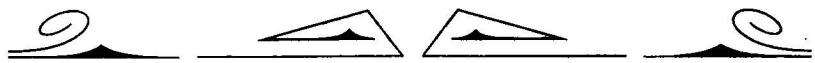


Publication of Seahorse Press



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Printed By: Richard A. Zier



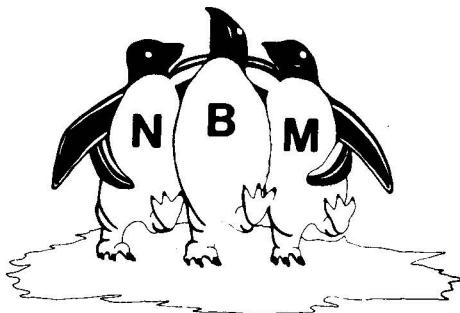
There are many people we would like to thank for their help during the production of this zine.

Bev Volker, Nancy Kippax, Martha Bonds - for advice, contributions (Yes, Nancy, we're STILL waiting), and encouragement,
Marion McChesney - for being Marion,
Terri Sylvester - our first contributor,
Mary Mills - for Hooker, Riggo, and McCoy (and that's bear-ly the beginning, you scum!),
Carole Swoboda - for artwork on demand,
Linda Deneroff - for her advice, suggestions and publicity,

and the rest of the "Baltimore Group" - Jo, Willa, Russ, Suzanne, Margaret, Berri and Joan ...

and a special thanks to

J. Emily Vance - who showed up occasionally to offer her infinite wisdom in ... (to be determined in Issue #2)



We dedicate this issue to Leonard Nimoy,
Harve Bennett and Star Trek III ...
'Nuff said.



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COVER ART - T.J. Burnside

INSIDE FRONT COVER - Betsy Barr
BACK COVER ART - Carole Swoboda



EDITORS'

It's all Dick's fault! If only I had known, last August, what I would be getting myself into when I found out he was a printer. And that Sandy would take me up on my crazy suggestion. Put out a zine indeed!

On the other hand, it hasn't been quite as bad as I'd been led to believe. I guess we've been lucky. Or good (hah!). Having editors with 20 or so zines' worth of experience behind them offer their suggestions doesn't hurt.

Despite our newness to zine editing, I think we've managed to put together an impressive first issue. We'd like to hear your comments on it. LoC's are greatly appreciated.

For the future, we're going to try to top ourselves with a second issue, tentatively scheduled for Clippercon (February 1985). And get Sunbird III edited before Jennifer enters the Peace Corps in June (it's HOW many pages??)

And maybe Sandy will get some sleep.



Thanks also to Rad (Kareem), who can be a real pain, but has been behind us all the way and insists on being the first to buy an issue.



PAGES

Hmmm... August 20, 1983 - will that be a day to remember? or forget? For it was on that day that Mind Meld was born. If anyone would have told me we'd be putting out our own zine a year ago, I would have asked them what they had been drinking. Who would have thought that an impulsive remark like "Let's do a zine" would turn into a reality. (I only saw my first zine in December of 1982.

All kidding aside - we've had a lot of encouragement from the "Contact Group" - and with their advice - and some luck and hard work on our part - we've put together what I think is a pretty good first issue. Also, a desire to keep Star Trek alive is a strong motivation. Without fandom and people working to keep Star Trek a facet of the present, rather than the past, many fan writers and/or artists would not have the opportunity to use their skills to "explore strange new worlds." I'm glad we are a part of this adventure. Please, please, send us your comments - how can we improve? ... What did you like? Any comments directed at a specific writer and/or artist will be passed along to them.

It's definitely been a learning experience - and VERY time consuming (my typewriter has seen more work since August than it has the whole time I've owned it!). But you must set priorities: zine first, zine second, zine third, then work and lastly, sleep (Yes, Michelle, I'm going to try to get some sleep!) But it's also been fun (and, besides, I'm told it doesn't get any easier!)

I must give a special thanks to my brother, Dick for doing the printing and allowing us to pay AFTER it's done - as well as his expertise in guiding us along the way regarding artwork, paper, etc. Also a thanks to my mother for her last minute proofing.

Also - I would like to especially thank Carole for her being willing to do several pieces of important artwork - and on short notice - in time for our deadline.

Well ... on to Mind Meld #2 (yes, we are doing another issue!). Now, Michelle, you know I told you we must get Sunbird, Part 3 edited. Besides, it's only about 100 pages! Sleep? What's Sleep? zzzzzzzz

Sandy

Oh, yes, and Mary - thanks for the SNAKES!!!



That Elusive Emotion

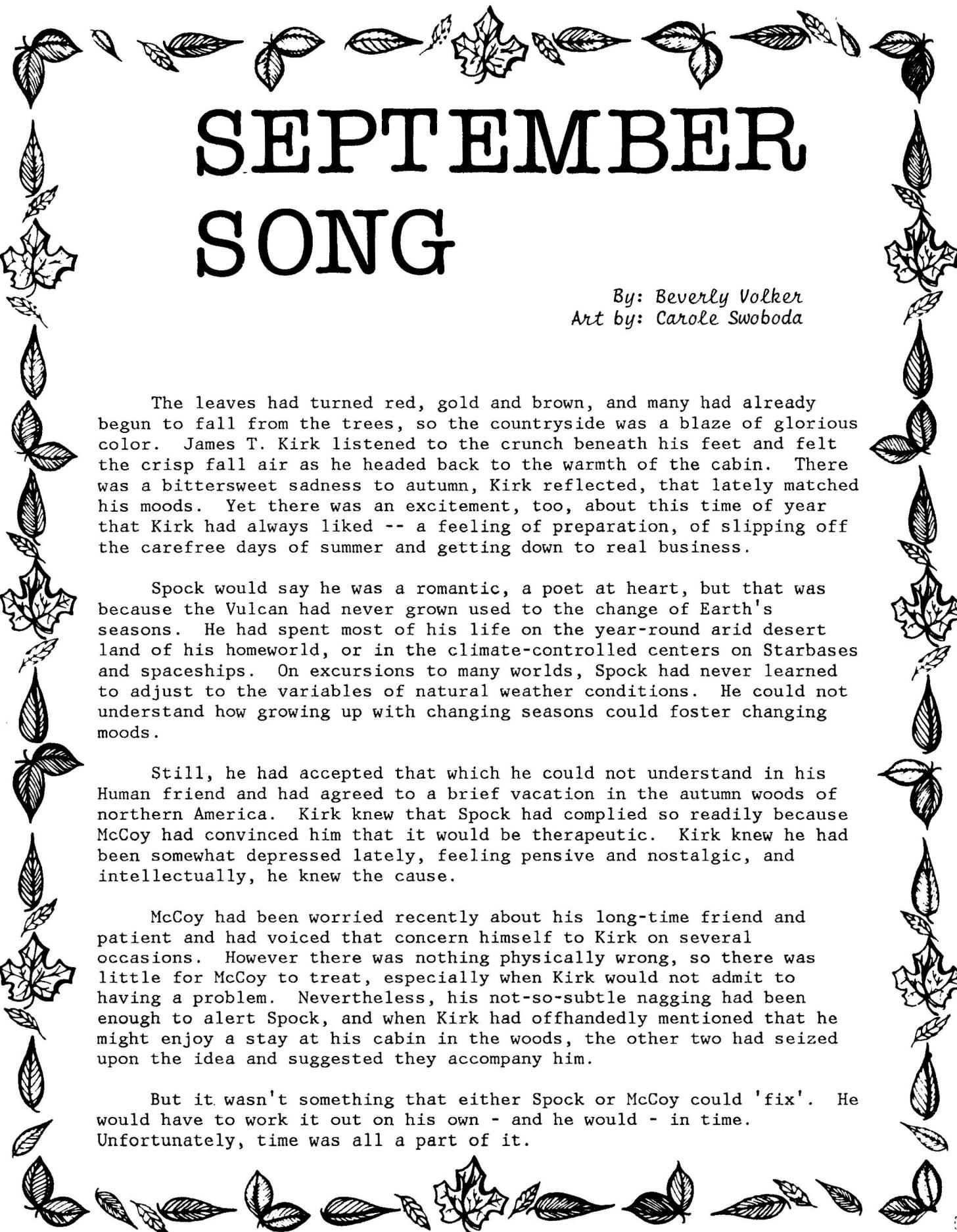
by: Karen Hayden

Happiness was an emotion
I thought I'd never feel,
Unless my body was affected by
Spores, atavachron, or other outside influence.
It was flighty as a feather
Blowing upon the breeze,
And each time I reached out
To catch it with fingers, numb,
It blew well out of reach, again.

But as the years flew past
Upon that breeze of time,
I came to know that emotion, and accept it,
With no regrets, no qualms.
I came to realize that it was he
Who had caused me to be...happy.
He, my other half, the better half,
My half of me, a whole at last.
Finally at home.

It took a long time
For the child in me
To become a man, and realize
Just what I was being given
Tentatively, freely, with no ties,
No conditions.
But realize I did, eventually,
And I could rejoice in realization,
And return some of what I'd been given.

I was still the Vulcan
That I'd vowed I'd be, in my youth.
But I realized that I had tried too hard
To be the Vulcan I could never be
Because of my blood, mixed,
Because of the manner of my birth,
And acceptance came, and was welcomed,
For that human half of me, too.
Life held a new meaning, a new magic, then,
Because of that acceptance and understanding.
Thanks to he, named Kirk.



SEPTEMBER SONG

*By: Beverly Volker
Art by: Carole Swoboda*

The leaves had turned red, gold and brown, and many had already begun to fall from the trees, so the countryside was a blaze of glorious color. James T. Kirk listened to the crunch beneath his feet and felt the crisp fall air as he headed back to the warmth of the cabin. There was a bittersweet sadness to autumn, Kirk reflected, that lately matched his moods. Yet there was an excitement, too, about this time of year that Kirk had always liked -- a feeling of preparation, of slipping off the carefree days of summer and getting down to real business.

Spock would say he was a romantic, a poet at heart, but that was because the Vulcan had never grown used to the change of Earth's seasons. He had spent most of his life on the year-round arid desert land of his homeworld, or in the climate-controlled centers on Starbases and spaceships. On excursions to many worlds, Spock had never learned to adjust to the variables of natural weather conditions. He could not understand how growing up with changing seasons could foster changing moods.

Still, he had accepted that which he could not understand in his Human friend and had agreed to a brief vacation in the autumn woods of northern America. Kirk knew that Spock had complied so readily because McCoy had convinced him that it would be therapeutic. Kirk knew he had been somewhat depressed lately, feeling pensive and nostalgic, and intellectually, he knew the cause.

McCoy had been worried recently about his long-time friend and patient and had voiced that concern himself to Kirk on several occasions. However there was nothing physically wrong, so there was little for McCoy to treat, especially when Kirk would not admit to having a problem. Nevertheless, his not-so-subtle nagging had been enough to alert Spock, and when Kirk had offhandedly mentioned that he might enjoy a stay at his cabin in the woods, the other two had seized upon the idea and suggested they accompany him.

But it wasn't something that either Spock or McCoy could 'fix'. He would have to work it out on his own - and he would - in time. Unfortunately, time was all a part of it.

Kirk smiled to himself as he walked. He had caught on to their ploy right away. He was so used to their actions that there was no way they could fool him. Still he did enjoy their company, and since the cabin and the woods were wonderful in the fall, Kirk readily accepted the offer of his two friends.

Spock, he knew, would not be comfortable no matter how many warm clothes he had brought along or how high they kept the fire blazing in the fireplace. And McCoy, for all his down-home, country-doctor facade, was really a man bred to modern creature comforts. Neither had ever shared Kirk's love of the pioneer spirit, but Kirk chuckled that a little roughing it would serve both of them right for their constant collective worrying over him. Kirk hurried his pace as he neared the cabin.

"Did you enjoy your walk?" Spock looked up from the book he was reading as Kirk entered the cabin. The Vulcan, in a chair near the fireplace, was dressed in a thermal shirt with a high neck and long thermal trousers tucked into warm houseboots.

Kirk grinned. "Yes, it's pretty brisk out there." The Vulcan grunted and curled his long legs under him. "Where's Bones?" Kirk tossed his jacket over the couch and crossed to sit in the chair opposite his friend.

"The Doctor is in his room talking to the MedCenter. He said he had a patient he wanted to check on."

Kirk reached for an apple from a basket on the chair-side table and took a bite. "The woods are beautiful, all full of color. It's really prettier now than it is in summer when everything is green."

"In the eye of the beholder, I believe, is the correct phrase." Spock lay down his book. "But it does seem strange to me that Earth would bring forth its most brilliant hues just before dying."

Kirk gave the Vulcan a quizzical look. "That's a philosophical observation, Spock. I'm sure there must be a point in it somewhere."

Spock returned Kirk's gaze with a non-committal expression. "Only that perhaps when one believes that things are over, coming to an end, if you would, there is still a bit of glory and wonder left."

Kirk rose from the chair without replying. Picking up an iron, he poked at the wood in the fireplace sending blue and yellow sparks flying upward, twinkling briefly like the stars in space.

"All things must come to an end," he said quietly without turning around.

"Both the good and the bad," Spock agreed. Kirk turned quickly, smiling.

"It has been that, hasn't it - good and bad?"

Spock returned the smile with a softening of his features. "Jim, we were speaking theoretically. Surely you do not believe that things are coming to an end for us."

Kirk sat back down and propped his feet on the stool in front of him. He stared into the fire.

"There is a line from an old song. I don't remember it all but it was something about '...in the autumn of our years...' That's how I feel now. The days of summer gold and youth are over and it's ... Autumn." He shrugged. "The season before winter."

"A season of color and harvest. A time of work and gathering in of summer stores, if I understand Earth customs and legends correctly." Spock leaned forward in his chair and looked earnestly into Kirk's eyes. "Jim, you have so much experience; there is so much for you yet to do. The stars are still waiting to be explored. There is no need for you to remain planetbound..."

"You're beginning to sound like McCoy!" Kirk interrupted, frowning.

Spock looked away, then he leaned back in his chair, eyes focused on the fireplace. Kirk watched him for a moment, knew he was sulking.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that," he offered. Spock nodded but did not look at him.

"Spock, try to understand. You're a Vulcan; your life expectancy is twice mine. You still have years and years of prime activity before you even begin to approach old age..."

"So do you. And I am only half-Vulcan."

"All right. I'm not saying that I'm ready for a retirement fund yet. It's just that I suppose we look at things differently when we're young and there's so much time for everything. I guess I'm beginning to sense an awareness of that time running out." Spock turned to gaze at his friend.

"The very nature of our careers have not afforded much by way of a guarantee of longevity."

Kirk grinned. "We've almost got that beat now, Spock. Not much danger involved in being a teacher or Chief of Operations." the grin was less than sincere, the irony of the statement bitter.

Spock's brows knitted together in consternation. "Is that why you accepted a ground assignment - to avoid the hazards of space service? Do you now believe that you can ensure a longer existence by eliminating the daily risks of exploration?"

"You ought to know me better than that!" Kirk's answer was almost too quick. Spock continued to gaze at him for a few more seconds, then the Vulcan stood abruptly.

"I believe it is time to begin the preparation for our evening meal. If you will excuse me..."

"It won't be easy saying good-bye," Kirk blurted out. Spock stopped, a shudder seemed to pass through him and he turned to peer incredulously at the Human. Once begun, Kirk seemed to need to say more.

"You'll see," he breathed. "When you're all alone ... when you have outlived me ... what will you do then, Spock? How ... how will you feel about that?" Kirk stood to face his long time friend, companion, the man who was as nearly the other half of himself as anyone could ever be. His voice quivered slightly.

"I'm ... going to hate having to leave you behind."

Spock could find no words to reply to his friend's admission and no voice with which to speak. He seemed rooted to the spot where he stood as all at once a hot/cold chill washed over him and he felt his mouth go dry and his palms become wet. Kirk's statement had invoked such a sudden, violent terror in him that for that brief instant, he was unable to control his reaction. Too easily Kirk read his discomfort, and moved toward him, a sad smile warming his features.

"Forget it," Kirk spoke softly, placing a hand on Spock's arm. "Forget I said that." The smile broadened. "Hey, this is supposed to be a holiday and here I am getting all maudlin. Go on. Get dinner ready and I'll call Bones. We only have two days left to ourselves and then it's back to the old grind."

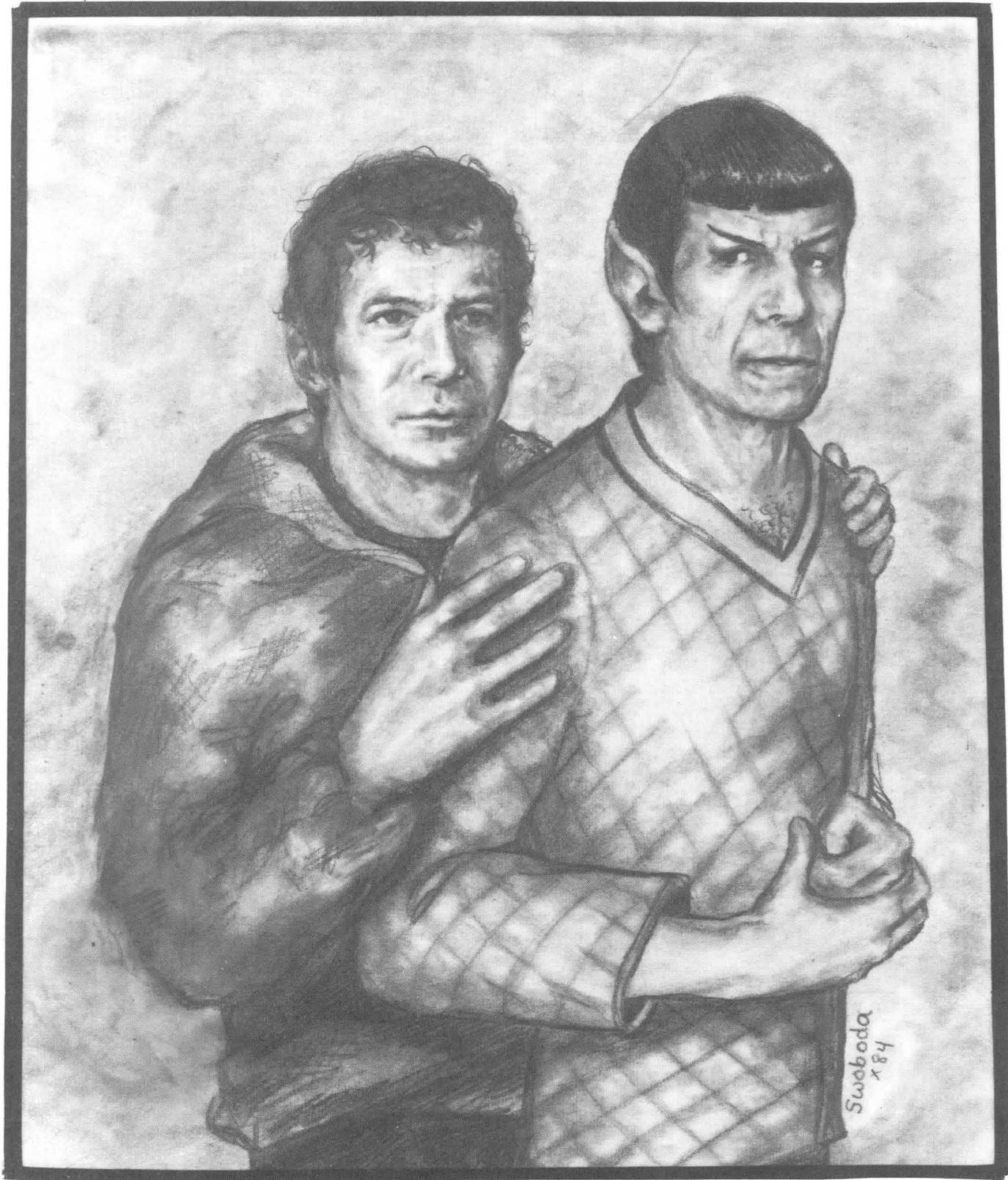
Just then a third figure emerged from one of the bedrooms. "Who's talking about getting back to work?" McCoy joined his two friends. Kirk turned at the doctor's approach.

"I was just telling Spock that we should really get busy and enjoy these last two days. He has a full duty roster waiting for him back at headquarters - a whole new group of trainees to complete, a Kobayashi Maru test to give, then an actual training mission on the Enterprise."

McCoy's arrival gave Spock a release from Kirk's last statement to him and he gratefully acknowledged the changed mood of the moment. He swallowed down the lump that had risen in his throat and, for the doctor's benefit, allowed a familiar expression of pained tolerance to cross his features.

"Perhaps the Admiral believes that his rank will exempt him from participation," Spock teased, "but it will be his job to hold the final inspection and to give the final grading."

Kirk would not be deterred. "Only after you've whipped them into shape, Captain. And I'll expect one hundred percent."



McCoy rolled his eyes. "You always do."

Kirk nodded. "True, Doctor. Space service can tolerate no less. It's the only way to ensure a measure of safety for these kids."

"Kids, huh?" McCoy drawled. "Listen to the old man. Just because you have another birthday comin' up ..." Kirk started to object but McCoy would not be interrupted. "Let me tell you, Jim-boy, being young's not all it's rumored to be. Oh sure, you have vigor and time on your side, dreams to fulfill and a whole lifetime in which to do 'em. But being young also means uncertainty and vulnerability. It means being scared to death of what the future will bring, being on the brink of a new discovery and feeling all alone, isolated because there's no one who really understands what you feel..." McCoy stopped abruptly, realizing that he had begun to preach and he had not meant to do so. He grinned sheepishly, first at Kirk, then at Spock. "Sorry."

Kirk drew in a breath. "Well, Bones, I will keep that in mind ... next time the occasion arises. Now, would you say that I was acting like a 'kid' if I suggested we make a fire out of the dried leaves and wood and cooked dinner outside in the autumn dusk? Or would it be more fitting for men of our station and rank to take our meal more sedately inside in front of the fire?" He was being flip and McCoy knew it, understood the old Kirk cover-up when the Admiral wanted no more probing on a subject. McCoy tacitly agreed to let it drop for the time. He threw a conspiratorial look in Spock's direction.

"Hmmm, I suppose Spock and I would prefer to enjoy dinner by the fire," the Doctor's voice was deliberately slow as if considering. "But you're gonna be hell-bent for doin' it outside and we're gonna wind up givin' in to you, so we might as well save time and get started raking leaves. Spock, you'd better put on an extra jacket. That evening air's gonna get quite nippy."

Spock signed and his gaze rested on Kirk for a long moment. "You are correct, Doctor, but we did come up here to experience the pleasures of the season. I'll get my heavy outerwear."

Fondly, Kirk watched him leave. McCoy was right about one thing, he knew. He didn't have to worry about feeling isolated, all alone facing an uncertain future with no one to understand how he felt. The years had given him Spock ... and McCoy, too, who sometimes understood too well ... thoughtfully, Kirk turned to his friend.

"You think he'd object if I suggested that we come back here after this next mission? It'll be winter then and the woods are beautiful when they're all white..."

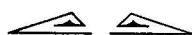
McCoy laughed, "He'll object. But he'll do it."



HOLD BACK THE DARK

By: Sandy Zier

It was dark and he could barely breathe. Whoever had attempted to choke him had nearly finished him. The room seemed to be spinning and he knew that it would not be long before he would be unconscious, with no one around to help him. Feeling his neck, he could tell his trachea was crushed. He knew he was going to die unless he could find something - anything - sharp enough to establish an airway until he was found. Groping in the dark, his hands came upon what seemed to be a rock with a sharp edge, a spearhead. As many times as he had done this to patients, he wondered if he had the strength to cut into his own throat - even if it was the only way to survive. As things became more cloudy, he pressed the spearhead against his throat. He felt the rush of air into his trachea as he drifted off into unconsciousness.



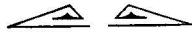
McCoy jolted out of a sound sleep. Sweating, and with shaking hands, he clutched his throat to find out what he already knew - he was fine, at least physically. He knew he had to do something. The dreams had started not long after he received the diagnosis. He had not shared his test results with anyone, nor had he mentioned the dreams. He could not burden Kirk with the prognosis at a time like this. The Admiral was still dealing with Spock's death. McCoy had to remain strong for Kirk. However, it would not be much longer before he would need someone himself. Remembering when he had had to face having xenopolycythemia, and living through the nightmare of knowing he was going to die, McCoy wondered if he would be strong enough to deal with it this time.

A miracle was too much to hope for this time. There would be no cure. He was going to die, and soon.

McCoy got up from the bed, and went to the computer. For the 20th time, he scanned his records. The biopsy showed Reed-Sternberg cells, the diagnostic *sina qua non* of a condition that used to be known as Hodgkins Disease. He was beyond the point of traditional treatment. His voice was already affected. Before long, McCoy would not be able to hide the hoarseness with drugs and he knew he would have to tell Kirk before it reached that point. His friend, suffering his own grief, would be upset if he knew McCoy were holding back something this important.

How can I tell my best friend that he's going to lose someone else close to him? McCoy thought. Should I joke about it and blame it on the 'ole Georgia blood" or should I just resign, leave the Service and tell him afterwards? It would not be long before Dr. Chapel or one of the medical technicians caught on that certain drugs were being used for purposes other than those listed in the log.

McCoy had thought long and hard about the decision he was about to make. He reflected back over the past when Kirk was forced to deal with losing a crew member. As much as those times affected Kirk, McCoy knew that they did not compare with the pain Kirk was feeling now over Spock's death. McCoy could still envision Kirk's face when he had seen Spock, close to death, in the main reactor room; disbelief and anguish so apparent on the Admiral's face. The pain McCoy felt for Kirk, as well as his own sense of loss, were also acutely present in his mind. They both had lost a dear friend. McCoy found himself again questioning the need to tell Kirk about his own illness. However, he knew he had to soon. McCoy also knew that by telling Kirk, he would finally have to confront the inevitable himself, and that was not a prospect to which he was looking forward.



James Kirk awoke suddenly and looked at his chronometer. He waited, as though at any moment he were expecting someone to signal at the door. Bones needs me, Kirk thought. Concerned by this strong intuition, Kirk dressed and headed for McCoy's quarters. Upon his arrival, he found McCoy dressed and about to leave.

Somewhat startled, Kirk stopped in the doorway.
"Bones, is everything okay? Is there anything you need to talk to me about?"

With a puzzled look, McCoy motioned Kirk to a chair.
"Everything's fine with me, Jim. What gives you the idea anything is wrong?"

Kirk sat down, feeling awkward. "I wish you wouldn't hold back on me Bones. We're friends. Please don't let your concern for me stop you from telling me what's wrong."

McCoy was becoming concerned. Something was definitely worrying Kirk. "Jim, there's really nothing wrong with me. Please tell me what's bothering you."

Kirk hesitated. "Are you going to die?"

McCoy looked at him, bewildered. "I sure wasn't planning to, unless you know something I don't know."

Kirk began to stammer. "Well ... I had a dream that you had a nightmare ... you were choking ... and you had this disease ... no cure ..."

McCoy cut him off. "Hold it Jim - you had a dream that I had a dream and ...? Now that beats everything." McCoy's eyes softened. "Jim, everything is all right. I'm going to be around for a long time, I promise." McCoy knew Kirk's fear of his death was part of the grieving process since Spock's death. Once a person has lost someone as close as Spock was to Kirk, there is always an expectation of losing someone else, sometimes to the extent that they accept the fact that that person will, indeed, die. McCoy noticed Kirk was relaxing. "Besides, if I died, who would be around to watch over you? Now, I have a couple things to finish up - I'll meet you at breakfast."

Kirk turned around and left, shaking his head and murmuring, "but the dream was so real."

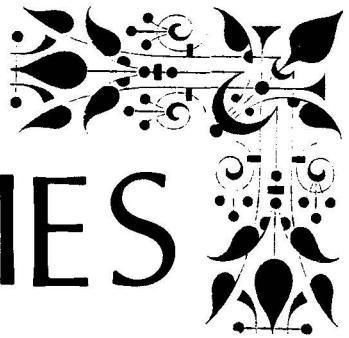


Several weeks later, while going over lab results on the crew's annual physicals, McCoy glanced at a slide on the monitor and looked closer, not believing what he was seeing - Reed-Sternberg cells. Looking at the patient's name, he recalled the conversation in his quarters a few weeks ago, and the promise he had made. McCoy hesitated, but only for a moment. Jim had to know the truth. He pushed the intercom button - "Sickbay to Bridge - Jim, come down here immediately!" McCoy looked again at the name on the slide: Leonard McCoy, M.D., Chief Medical Officer.





Swoboda
x84



ENDLESS SKIES

*Poetry and Art by
Carole Swoboda*

The endless skies,
Reflecting in your eyes,
Tell me that you will never be mine.

The endless skies,
'pears not to hear my sighs
And the soft, glowing stars seem unkind.

My hopes, dreams, happiness has ended
I see you love another and soon you will be gone.

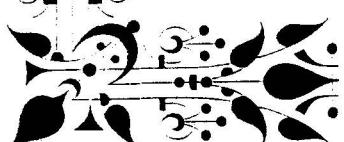
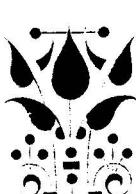
Away from me,
To your silver lady--Enterprise
In endless skies.

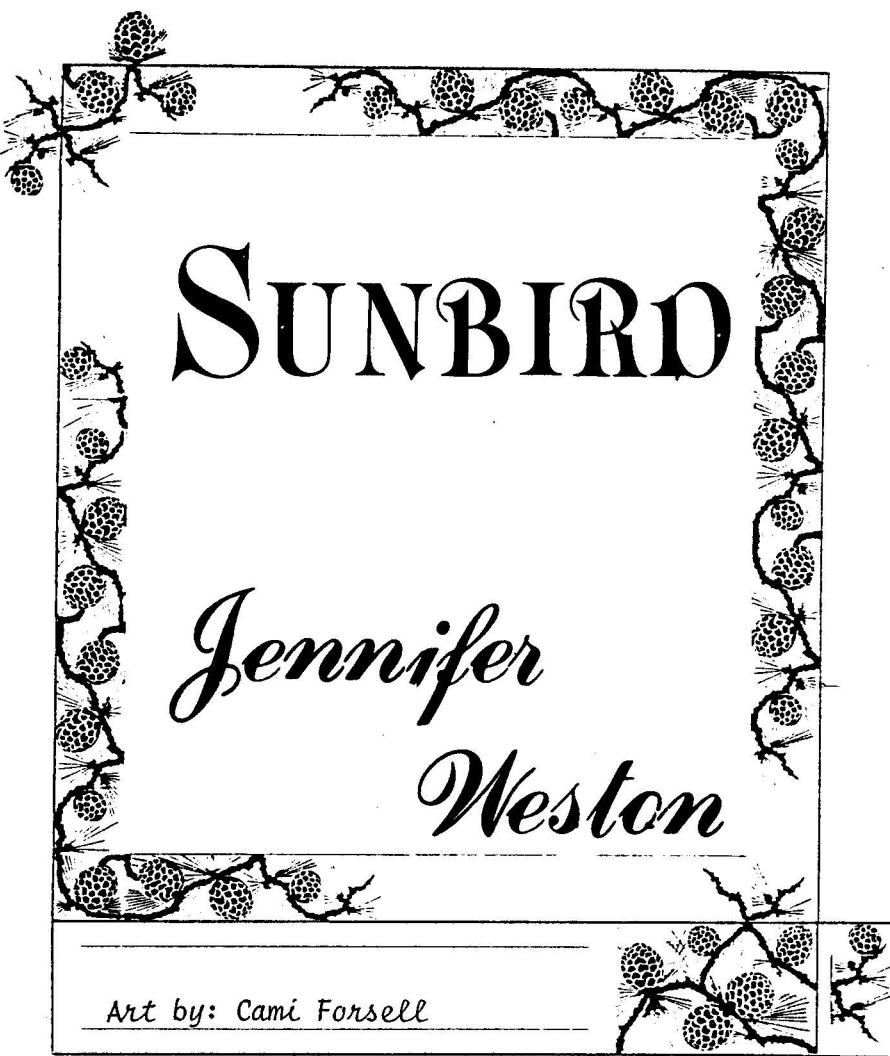
Sweet, stellar space
That brought you to this place,
Calls to you with its dark luring song.

I watch your face
While both of us embrace
And I know I will not hold you long.

My love, fond wishes and devotion
Will always be there with you no matter when you roam.

Away from me
To your silver lady...you will fly
In endless skies.





Eds' note:

Sunbird, by Jennifer Weston, is based on two stories previously published. A short synopsis of these stories is below.

In Me and Thee, by Trinette Kern (printed in Off The Beaten Trek #1), Kirk is released from Brewster Penitentiary after serving four years, having been convicted of negligence. Kirk is met by Dr. McCoy and Scotty who deliver the news that the Enterprise was lost on a mission not long after Kirk entered prison. Starfleet had claimed the loss was a deliberate move by Spock, who had been given command after Kirk's court martial, to gain revenge for Kirk's conviction. Spock was then dishonorably discharged from the fleet, exiled from Vulcan and was forced out of Federation territory. McCoy and Scotty lead Kirk to Spock, who has had to keep hidden because of his exile. Spock invites Kirk to join him on Eskar, his chosen home, and become a part of his import-export business. Spock tells Kirk he is now married to a Vulcan woman and has a family.

In Until That Tomorrow, by Mary K. Frey (printed in Off The Beaten Trek #2), Kirk joins Spock on Eskar and, after some time, adjusts to his new life as Captain of a transport vessel. He meets T'Prenn, Spock's wife, T'Pryr (T'Prenn's daughter by a previous bonding) and T'Parin, Spock's daughter. Spock also has a new born son, who is given the name James Tiberius. In his early days with Spock and T'Prenn, Kirk is uncomfortably aware that all is not well between Spock and T'Prenn, and believes he is the source of this trouble.

The pale, fragrant wood cylinders burned slowly, sending a flickering, golden glare through the delicately wrought grill of the wall-brazier and onto the faces of the two men beside it. Kirk watched the rippling pattern play over Spock's tranquil features as he sank further back into his earth-style chair, with padded back and armrests. The captain was savoring a sensation he hadn't known for a long time - that of honest fatigue. Within the hour he had returned from his first voyage in command of the Phoenix, one of Spock's three Class G transport vessels.

Kirk let his eyes travel over the contours of the chamber. This was his favorite room in Spock's home. Correction: their home. It was the "siyul", the Vulcan equivalent of a den: a husband's retreat from the rest of the family. The decor, although distinctly non-earth, was restfully dignified and elegant. The ceiling and walls were a rich dark wood, with a natural luster that reflected the yellow light of the wall-brazier. On these glittered several pieces of displayed hardware, of Vulcan origin Kirk guessed.

A sleek, wooden desk occupied one corner, the viewer over it the one mechanical intrusion. In the far wall was an unusual feature: a door leading directly outside. Kirk could only speculate as to why Spock had installed a passage straight from his indoor sanctuary to the virgin plains of Eskar.

This had become Kirk's sanctuary as well. Elsewhere in the house he felt like a guest; though honored, an outsider within the household Spock ruled as undisputed patriarch. But within the walls of the siyul their relationship was as it had always been. Jim and Spock usually spent their evenings here, planning or reminiscing. Tonight, Kirk just wanted to relax and enjoy the sensations his new command had reawakened in him.

Quite suddenly, he became aware Spock was looking at him, and sensed the Vulcan was inviting him to share his thoughts. He stretched unselfconsciously and said the first thing that came into his mind.

"Well...Spock, how has your family been?"

"Much the same as when you left." The dark eyes softened. "And yourself?"

"It's not so hard, now that I have something else to think about." He lifted his eyes in time to see the concern in Spock's gaze turn to stoicism.

"What is your opinion of the Phoenix, Captain?"

"She's a fine ship." Kirk smiled as he said it. He'd already developed genuine affection for the little vessel. Not the Enterprise, perhaps, but a sleek, compact, delightfully maneuverable craft - an athletic young woman to the Enterprise's stately lady.

He was not yet as at ease with her crew. Most of them were former Star Fleet officers who, for various reasons, had lost their commissions. There was plenty of bitterness, but there's was also a special strength, the sort that comes from being sorely tested. Kirk was confident that he could take advantage of those good qualities.

"The crew's got a lot of potential. If you really want me to, I'll be glad to take command permanently."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I thought I had made that clear even before you decided to come to Eskar."

"I know. I guess I just haven't gotten used to the idea that anyone would want to give me a command after what happened to my last one."

"The other officers aboard the Phoenix reported that you performed excellently. That is the only credential I require."

Kirk bowed his head slightly, gratified. Yet, there was still that nagging doubt...the one thing which had prevented him from totally accepting his new command.

"I wish I could convince myself of that, Spock. Just knowing I was convicted of culpable negligence..."

"The accident at Ursula was not your fault," the Vulcan stated definitively.

"You believe so, but five former starship captains judged otherwise. I just can't get rid of the feeling that they couldn't have been totally wrong." Kirk paused from his struggle to express himself to notice that Spock's eyebrows had lowered into something like a frown.

Then he nodded slightly, as though he had come to a decision. "I may be able to eliminate that problem for you, Jim." Spock rose and moved toward the desk. In the dim light it was difficult for Kirk to make out exactly what the Vulcan was doing. It looked as though he placed his palm against the wall and pressed. There was a click, and a wooden panel over the desk swung open. Spock reached into the hiatus behind it and removed something. As he stepped back into the circle of firelight Kirk saw it was an ordinary storage envelope, unmarked, but worn with age around the edges.

"I secured this through somewhat irregular means, and have concealed it ever since," Spock stated as he unsealed the envelope. "I believe this is the proper time to show it to you." He withdrew a small paper rectangle.

Kirk jumped in his chair.

It was a pink-bordered inter-office memo, of the kind used exclusively at all star bases, and at Star Fleet Command. The date on the top corner was 8983.4, which Kirk recalled as the day before his trial. But it was the color of the edging which had made him start. Pink meant that it was a Class Four memo, which should have no existence outside of the office to which it was addressed.

Devices for disposing of confidential material had gone through impressive improvement since the paper-shredders of the twentieth century. The anti-matter chambers installed on every star base promised to be their Omega. All Class Four memos, after being read, were placed in special one-way



containers for delivery to the disposal chambers. To remove anything from those containers was far beyond the capabilities of most people, in addition to being a Federation offense, but it appeared that Spock had done just that.

"Does anyone know you took that?" Kirk asked, his voice inadvertently hushed.

"I believe not. I very much doubt Star Fleet would refrain from prosecuting me if they were aware that I had this. The office numbers indicate that this was a message from Admiral Komack to Commodore Lynd." Spock met Kirk's eyes carefully and saw that Kirk remembered the name. Lynd had been one of the five-member jury that had sentenced Kirk to the Brewster Penitentiary. Jim tensed, sensing that something of great significance was about to be revealed.

Spock unfolded the memo. It was almost blank, as there was only a single sentence scrawled across the middle:

'This is our opportunity to eliminate J.K.'

Kirk stared, aware that part of his mind was shocked, while another part was totally unsurprised.

"Your conviction was not based solely on the evidence, Jim," Spock said gently. Kirk shot him an accusing look.

"Why didn't you show this to me earlier?"

"I reasoned that I had to wait until you had adjusted to your new circumstances. To tell you of this before you had regained a sense of security..."

"Yes, you were right," Kirk agreed, "but didn't you even try to use this to appeal my case?"

"I had no way of knowing to whom I could safely reveal this evidence. The existence of one such memo implies the existence of others. If there was a conspiracy against you at Star Fleet Command, and I had shown this to the wrong person, they would have warned Komack and Lynd instead of investigating your trial. Then the officers involved could have claimed that J.K. stands for something unrelated to you, and I would have received sentencing for unlawful possession of a Class Four memo. I would have been no help at all to you inside a penal colony."

"So you've been keeping it to yourself for four years. Spock, I hate to imagine what that must have been like."

"Unimportant," the Vulcan said, with that one word dismissing four years of torment. He extended the slip of paper to his former captain. "It was your career. You are the only one who may decide what is to be done with this."

Kirk took it, grasping it firmly as though to be certain of its reality. At last, in his hand, tangible evidence of what he had suspected since his conviction. "I'm going to get this exposed if it's the last thing I ever do!"

There was a warmth in Spock's eyes other than that of the firelight. "I had hoped you would say that."

"Hoped?! Did you think for one minute that I wouldn't..." Kirk started to snap, and cut himself off. After considering the forces against them, he realized that Spock had ample reason for doubting. It would be very easy for Kirk to just throw this away and forget about it, along with the rest of his old life.

Except, he hadn't forgotten as much as he'd thought.

In fact, he felt more like himself now than he had since the trial. He had a goal now...something to strive for again! The grateful smile he gave Spock, as he stood and clasped his friend's shoulder, came straight from the heart.

"Time to get some rest. We'll have plans to make tomorrow."

"Yes, Jim." The dying fire reflected in his eyes like two bright yellow stars as he added to himself, "Welcome back, Captain."



Kirk soon concluded that it was unnecessary to keep an eye on T'Parin as they worked together in the little hemlock grove. Though she moved with the unsteady coordination of any three-year-old, she never made any mistake about what she was reaching for. With unflagging diligence, she tugged out the dome-shaped, pinkish sprouts encroaching on the edge of the fern-bank. They were the sprouts of the skaykoths, those abundant Eskarian denizens which bore such resemblance to gigantic pink asparagus stalks that Kirk mentally referred to them as such.

Eskar's sun was smaller than Sol, but some hardy species of imported green plants were able to survive under it. Jim lifted one of the soft branch tips he'd just pruned off to his face and inhaled deeply. It smelled like one of the cold, shadowed glens in the forest near his boyhood home in Iowa. He loved to tend this patch of Earth vegetation Spock had established just outside the siyul door. The neighbors might only regard it as an exotic curiosity, like a greenhouse full of orchids, but to Kirk it was a piece of home. His friend had anticipated every need.

Spock was not at home. He was meeting with some associates on another continent. Kirk preferred to spend his time outdoors during such periods. He never felt entirely comfortable in T'Prenn's presence when Spock was absent. Perhaps it was because he occasionally detected traces in her carriage and mannerisms which indicated she had once been a person of high standing. Spock had never told him what T'Prenn had done to incur exile, and knowing how much Vulcans respected each other's privacy, Kirk had never asked. He could only deduce that her fall, and her suffering, had been at least as great as his own, or Spock's.

Before moving to the next tree, Jim paused to contemplate the hemlock tassels against the beryl-green sky. If he shut his eyes and just inhaled, he could pretend he was on Earth. Even as he grinned to himself at the childishness of the idea, he felt a pang of homesickness. His eyes lowered, but he no longer saw the trees.

His daydreaming was interrupted when he noticed that T'Parin had completed her weeding and was standing, hands clasped behind her back, waiting for further instructions. As Kirk looked her in the face he experienced the same tiny mental start as usual. Those eyes were so very much like her father's. "T'Parin, would you please pick up these branch clippings for me?"

"Yes, sir," the girl answered as she bent to the task. That flawless articulation was also out of place coming from a toddler. Spock must have been teaching her English since she first began to talk, which implied that he took a substantial interest in his children's upbringing, yet Kirk had not known him to spend any time alone with his family since he, Kirk, had come here. Had his arrival been a disruptive influence?

Kirk shut off the pruning laser, as melancholy invaded him. The probability that Spock was only giving him special attention until he'd had time to settle down was insufficient consolation. The impression remained, that there was some deep rift between Spock and T'Prenn. Of what nature, Kirk could only guess at, but he was half certain that his own presence might be a major contributing factor. *Intrusion or not, I've got to get Spock to talk about this sometime*, Kirk resolved. *I'm not going to break up his marriage ... not after everything he's done for me.*

It took him several seconds to notice T'Parin's work had been interrupted again. Still gripping a bundle of feathery green twigs, she was listening intently in the direction of Lindolan. Kirk stared across the plain and spotted the distant outline of an approaching air car. Spock returning? As the hum of its engines became audible, he pushed his way through soft branches to where he could see it clearly, and recognized it as one of the crafts that could be rented in the city. Probably one of the neighbors, still...

Kirk strode into the open, and T'Parin remained at the edge of the grove. The sharp hemlock perfume gave way to that of the skaykoths; a scent reminiscent of slightly overdone gingerbread. The arriving vehicle, which had started to curve up toward the roof, swerved back down and settled to the ground ten meters from the hemlocks. The humming ceased, and a single figure climbed from the driver's compartment.

"Bones!" Kirk exclaimed, surprised and delighted.

"Hi, Jim!" They greeted each other with embraces and slaps on the back.

"Bones, it's great to see you again! I've got something important to tell you about."

"So have I...Well! Who's this little wood nymph?"

Kirk noted the hemlock needles caught in the girl's satiny black hair and smiled at the aptness of Bones' description. "This is T'Parin, Spock's youngest daughter. T'Parin, this is Doctor McCoy, an old friend of mine and your father's."

T'Parin solemnly lifted her right hand, easily arranging her stubby fingers into that configuration many adult humans found impossible.

"Glubegk enkov, Doctor," she pronounced formally. She saved McCoy from attempting to reply by immediately vanishing back into the grove to resume her gathering. Kirk grinned at his friend's startled expression.

"Humph. He's raising 'em to be just like him, I see."

"Hopefully. Bones, how's Scotty?"

"Just fine. Except one of his generators gave him a rather drastic manicure recently."

"Anything serious?"

"Nothing a protoplaser and a belt of scotch couldn't fix."

"Heard anything from Peter?"

"Yep. He just graduated into Advanced, top of his class. But enough about us. What've you been up to?"

"I've got my own ship in Spock's fleet now...the Phoenix...a real beauty. Oh...and Spock just had a son!"

"Really. That's fine! Real fine." McCoy's pleasure as genuine, but was obviously undercut, as though he had something much more pressing on his mind. For the first time Kirk noticed a grim, shadowed look in the doctor's eyes. His hands tightened on McCoy's shoulders with sudden anxiety.

"Bones, what's wrong?"

McCoy seemed to age several years as his expression grew serious. "I've got a message for Spock. Where is he?"

"Away just now. He'll probably be back by evening. We can go inside to wait..."

"'Fraid I can't stay that long. I came in on an ore freighter that's scheduled to leave within an hour. Since Spock's away, I guess you'll have to be the one to tell him..."

"Captain Kirk?" Both men turned. T'Prenn was standing at the siyul door, regarding the newcomer with guarded curiosity. Young James was in her arms, examining the world with huge, contemplative eyes. Kirk promptly assumed an introductory stance, and greetings were exchanged once again. "Do you wish to come indoors, Doctor?" T'Prenn offered with all due respect.

"No, thank you, M'am." McCoy couldn't help looking at the tall, tragically dignified woman with more than casual curiosity. Apparently, this was the first time he'd ever seen her. "I'm not staying for any length of time. I've only come by to deliver a message." He glanced meaningfully at Kirk, and T'Prenn understood the request for privacy.

"It is time for T'Parin to rest." she stated.

"We're finished. She's been a help to me," Kirk offered with a smile as T'Parin emerged from the grove and stalked to the door. T'Prenn nodded gravely.

"I assume that baby was Spock's son?" McCoy inquired after the door had closed.

"Yes. James."

"A fine name," Bones remarked warmly, all a-grin. Then remembering his errand, he took a deep breath and began;

"About the same time we were meeting you on Brewster, Lieutenant Uhura received a promotion to Lieutenant-Commander and was transferred to a ground post; the Records Department at Star Fleet Command."

"Give her my congratulations," Kirk offered.

"That's not the important part. About a week ago, Scotty and I received a sealed communication from her. She'd uncovered a certain correspondence in the files; I don't know whether accidentally or deliberately." McCoy reached into his flight jacket pocket and withdrew a well-folded sheet of paper. "This is the copy she sent to us."

The Captain unfolded it and frowned as he scanned the page. It was dated some months after his conviction and addressed from Admiral Fitzgerald to Proctor Keelius of Rigel Two, but the written contents were unfathomably technical. 'Enterprise' was one of the only terms he recognized. "I can't make head or tail out of this."

"Scotty did." Bitterness invaded McCoy's voice. He tapped the date at the top. "We were at Rigel Two for overhaul at that time. These are instructions for work on the Enterprise which we never knew about. In brief, the ship was rigged, expertly, for the shields around the anti-matter pods to begin breaking down the first time any serious damage was done to the deflectors." Bones continued as though he didn't notice the stunned disbelief on Kirk's face. "A few weeks later, we were hit by the Klingons in the Roystadt system. Immediately after we'd dispatched the cruiser, Spock ordered evacuation. All these years we've been wondering if he'd really acted from necessity. Now we know."

Kirk didn't answer. Could not. A hot sensation had risen in his throat: hatred, such as he'd never known he was capable. When he finally spoke, his voice was stiff with emotion.

"It all fits! They slammed me down the first chance they got. I was too popular. Then, when all you rallied behind Spock instead of dispersing, they knew they had to get rid of him, too. They knew they couldn't buy him, and they were afraid he might know too much about my trial."

McCoy instantly detected Kirk's drift. "Your trial? Are you saying he had some special knowledge about it?"

"That's what I had to tell you." Kirk explained about the memo, and by the time he'd finished, the doctor's quiet anger had become raging fury. "Jim, we can't let them get away with this! Let me have that memo; I'll take it back to the Federation and I'll get those..."

"Hold on a minute." Another aspect had just come to Kirk's attention. "These instructions were sent to a native Rigellian ruler?"

"He'd have more than enough engineers under his command to do the job," McCoy snarled at the name on the paper.

"If the Rigellian government is involved in this, then it isn't just a cluster of jealous officers at Star Fleet Command eliminating two officers. It could mean extensive corruption...maybe through the entire Federation."

The alarming theory silenced both of them for a moment.

"Bones, we're going to need assistance from someone in the upper echelons to get this exposed. Do you know anyone at Star Fleet Command we might possibly be able to trust?"

The doctor responded promptly. "The Surgeon General. I've known her for over a decade. I don't believe there's a grain of corruption in her."

"Then I want you to arrange a meeting with her, try to decide for certain, and, if you're convinced she's honest, tell her everything we've learned."

McCoy's eyes widened. "Jim, if I do that and it turns out that I'm mistaken..."

"Then it's all our necks, I know, but we have to start somewhere." Kirk paused with sudden misgiving. "Maybe it's wrong for me to ask you to get so involved in this..."

"Don't talk nonsense. I've been involved for years."

Kirk smiled through the pain. "I know I'm putting a lot on you, Bones. When you go in to see her, you won't have a thing working for you except your own understanding of human character. That's why I wouldn't send anyone except you."

"It's kind of you to say that, but..."

"Kindness has nothing to do with it. This is a dangerous business - a very dangerous business, and you're the best qualified person I know to make a judgement of this sort. Even Spock's commended you on your insight."

"I just hope it wasn't one of the times he was wrong," McCoy murmured. He checked his wrist chronometer. "I have to leave."

They embraced briefly. "Take care of yourself, Bones," Kirk called as McCoy got back into the air car. "You're carrying very valuable cargo."

"I'll do my best to deliver it safely, Jim," the doctor answered as he started the engine. "Good-bye for now."

Kirk stared after the craft until it had long vanished from view over the pink stalks and rust-colored sands.



SURGEON GENERAL SIGRID RENI JOHANNSON

That name on the office door invoked a touch of reverence in McCoy, implanted during his academy days when Doctor Johannson, of the Constellation, had been considered the fleet medical officer most worthy of emulation. McCoy reminded himself sharply that this was no time to count on prejudices.

On the other hand, he considered moodily, it might not be any less reliable than anything else he had to depend on.

He'd been seething with anxiety about this encounter for over a week, wishing he could be sure he deserved the confidence Kirk had placed in him. Now that there were only minutes left, he felt desolately alone. If he did make the correct judgement, everything might begin here; if he made the wrong one, this was where everything would end. There was no one to help him make that decision.

Hell, even if I do tell her and she offers her help, how will I know she won't be acting as a double agent? That she won't turn us all in as soon as she gets the names of everyone involved? There was no way. He had no guarantees, all he could do was make the best judgement he was capable of. Nobody could ask anything more of him, no matter how important it was.

He hefted his sheath of papers - his own thesis on the Roventis Vaccine Project. He would pretend he'd come to discuss that in the event that he decided not to trust her. The wall chronometer had mercilessly rolled to 1300. Straightening his shoulders, McCoy pushed the signal button beside the door.

"Leonard McCoy?" a slightly pitched feminine voice inquired from the wall speaker.

"Yes, M'am. I made an appointment with you for this hour."

"Come in." The door slid silently into the wall; the doctor entered.

Sigrid Johannson had always reminded McCoy of some small wild animal which a man might feel the urge to protect, but which did not need protection from anyone. She was rather short, slim, with very alert light-gray eyes. Her hair, once brilliant blond, now faded to pale gold, was worn shoulder-



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length and close to her head. McCoy knew her to be sixty-seven; although she looked much younger. All of his colleagues seemed either to age rapidly on their medical failures, or to remain young on their knowledge of what was good for the human body. The Surgeon General was one of the most successful of the latter.

She was sitting behind her huge, crescent-shaped desk, dressed in a discreet white tunic-and-slacks uniform, as became her rank. The smile she gave McCoy seemed sincere.

"Good afternoon, Doctor."

"Afternoon, General," McCoy replied as he took a chair across from her.

"It's been over a year since you've given me a visit. What have you been doing?"

"I've kept busy," McCoy risked returning her smile, hoping that it wouldn't reveal his inner tension. "You know what being the Chief Medical Officer on a starship is like."

"Indeed I do." Her eyes dimmed with memories. "I hope your ship is satisfactory."

"Yes. The Kongo's a good vessel; good officers, for the most part... course, there'll never be another Enterprise..."

"I know that, too," Sigrid answered softly. "There will never be another Constellation, either, for me."

Her gaze had dropped to the desk top. There could be no doubting that her sorrow was genuine. Now McCoy recalled; her promotion had come a scant two months before her ship had been sent on its last, fatal mission to the L374 System.... And he remembered those echoing, hollow corridors on the wreck of the Constellation, so recently full of the sound and movement of hundreds of people, now dead....

Their eyes met again, each understanding the other's grief, and McCoy knew that this person could never have condoned the needless destruction of any vessel.

Very slowly he said, "What makes losing my ship especially hard is that I've always suspected that it didn't have to happen."

Instantly, alertness returned to her gaze. "You mean you think the Enterprise could have been salvaged?"

"I mean, I believe there are a number of people on this base who might have had reasons for wanting her destroyed; who may have taken steps to bring that about."

Those platinum eyes seemed to pierce right through him. Johannson reached swiftly for her intercom, and McCoy leaped out of his chair.

"Dray, hold all my calls. We're going to be in here for a while," Sigrid told the instrument.

"Yes, General," the receptionist's voice replied. Johannson turned it off and motioned for McCoy to sit. "Could you tell me, without mentioning any names, how you came to develop this suspicion, Doctor?"

"I..." (don't let her know anyone else was involved!) "...learned about a certain communication, from a high ranking officer here to a Rigelian official, with instructions to sabotage the Enterprise during repairs."

The Surgeon General pursed her lips. "That would be from Admiral Fitzgerald to Proctor Keelius."

McCoy nodded a confirmation. "You knew about it?"

"Not this letter specifically, but I've been at Star Fleet Command for six years. I know quite a lot about what goes on here to keep some of the Admirals and Commodores where they are: bribery, extortion, defamation of character, blackmail, and sabotage. And I know who contacts whom when there's work like that to be done." She suddenly looked tired. "Unfortunately, proving it is another matter."

Bones found he'd broken into a sweat. This was the beginning, but of something much bigger than he'd originally thought. "I've got some proof. That's why I came to you. I believed that if there was anybody in Star Fleet I could trust, it was you."

Sigrid leaned forward. "How much do you know?"

"I know that Captain Kirk's trial for culpable negligence was rigged for conviction, and that the Enterprise was sabotaged to give Star Fleet an excuse to discharge Captain Spock."

"That's the proverbial tip of the iceberg. If you have solid evidence, I can help you bring it out."

"I've got a memo, sent from an admiral to one of Kirk's jurors. It's dated the day before the trial started, and it says, 'this is our opportunity to eliminate J.K.'"

Johannson was disappointed. "That won't be sufficient. Initials..."

"Its obvious what they stand for!"

"To us. But it isn't sufficient to guarantee a conviction. Even from my position, it won't pay to make any accusations without ironclad evidence. There's too many corrupt officers here, all willing to protect each other. Moving too fast will only tell them who's against them."

McCoy almost punched the desk top, feeling more desolate than when he'd come in, but at least not alone any more. "There's gotta be something we can do.... Listen, we're not the only ones who know about this. I've got some friends who'd do just about anything to get this corruption exposed."

"I've been working on that myself for years, as actively as I could without giving my intentions away. There's hundreds of them here, on every Star Base, and within the governments of most of the Federation's planetary members. The only sure way to clean it up would be to secure convicting evidence on all of them at once. Are you friends willing to take on that kind of task, McCoy? It could take a lifetime."

"My friends are very determined, M'am. Two of them in particular."

Johannson smiled - one of those brief, ironic smiles she was so prone to. "Your former captains, Kirk and Spock?"

"Yes. They're both living on Eskar now - they're the ones who've got that memo. The others are Engineer Scott, aboard my own vessel, and Lt. Commander Uhura, in the Records Department here.

Sigrid was impressed. "Having an agent in the Records Department could be a big help. Well, if all of you are willing to commit yourselves, I can function as your anchor here. Any of you who can't get to Eskar can bring your findings to me."

McCoy was getting excited. "This could spread out further. If each of us knows a few more people who'll want to..."

"Doctor, may I suggest that you all be extremely careful about bringing anyone else into this? In addition to the need for secrecy, this'll be no light undertaking. Anyone you recruit must be made fully aware of that. If the corrupt block finds out that someone is spying on them, or just asking too many questions, they can arrange to have that person reprimanded, transferred, demoted, court-martialed, exiled... whatever is appropriate."

"I'll pass that on, but I don't think it's going to discourage anyone. Who are we going to be looking for evidence against?"

"I don't know every member of the block - that's another difficulty. But I've identified the three ringleaders: Admirals Komack, Fitzgerald and Fitzpatrick."

"I'm not surprised," McCoy murmured, remembering how much trouble those three had given the Enterprise over the years. "What about their immediate underlings?"

"We're going to have to consider everyone suspect. The most frightening aspect of this is, that while the corrupt block is a minority, I believe most of Star Fleet's higher-ranking officers have some awareness of the situation and are just willing to put up with it. And then there's others on the fringes who don't initiate the illegal activities, but carry out the instructions given them by the 'Rodinium Shield', as the inner circle calls itself." She pronounced the name disdainfully; it was the first time McCoy had ever heard her speak in such a scornful manner.

"How did this state of affairs ever develop?" he demanded.

Sigrid lifted her hands helplessly. "How does any such organization ever get into power? Small faults on everyone's part - too much trust in one's superiors, misplaced loyalties, paranoia. I imagine there's some who actually believe they're defending the Federation by maintaining this situation. You and I are to blame, to a certain extent, that it's gotten this far. The Rodinium Shield hasn't taken over completely yet, but they have a strong foot-hold, and we're not going to be able to count on anyone in Star Fleet Command to help us dislodge it."

"I'm beginning to see what you meant when you said this might take a long time," McCoy noted glumly.

"Discouragement may be our single greatest adversary - pass that on, too," the Surgeon General instructed. "When the operations begin, don't send anyone here two times in a row; they keep track of my visitors. And never try to meet with me anywhere else on the base. I have ways to tell when this room is being audibly-monitored."

That possibility had crossed McCoy's mind when he had entered, but it was startling to hear it said out loud. "How do you know?" he asked, his voice reflexively sunk to a whisper.

"There are methods of being certain, which we at Star Fleet Command have access to. The Rodinium Shield-bearers are concerned about such things, for obvious reasons. I make use of them too."

"Doesn't that make them suspicious of you?"

"I don't think so." Sigrid smiled smugly. "I believe I've developed a solid reputation for being so involved in my own work that I'm not likely to notice anything that's happening. It might pay for the rest of you to try to build similar reputations. It'll put them off guard, if you pretend you're stupider than you are."

"I'll keep that in mind, General."

"Above all, don't underestimate the danger," she cautioned. "People other than your captains have found out what it means to incur the disfavor of the Rodinium Shield. One of them is an old friend of mine, Commander Lo Sing."

"Lo Sing?! Didn't she abandon post at a critical moment during a Star Base attack, and falsify a computer transcript to cover herself?"

"I followed her trial very closely. It was one of the first events to give me wind of what was going on in Star Fleet. Lo Sing was a victim of an organized frame, just as were your captains."

"It's so hard to believe," McCoy confessed. "I've heard so many accounts, from so many reliable quarters..." A sinister thought came to him. Maybe the Rodinium Shield was perpetuating just such falsehoods about his own friends... perhaps many people would find it just as difficult to accept Kirk's and Spock's innocence.

"Consider that carefully," Sigrid warned. "This is what we're up against."

McCoy left the Surgeon General's office in a somber frame of mind, acutely aware of what actions and dangers his reply to Eskar was going to set in motion. And yet, knowing that they had an ally here, he felt more at home in Star Fleet Command now than he had at any time since Kirk's conviction.



Spock sat close beside the wall-brazier, staring fixedly into the fire. He had been holding that aspect for hours every evening, since learning about the sabotage done to the Enterprise. As he'd explained to Kirk, he was employing a special meditation to purge himself of the hatred he felt for the officials responsible.

Kirk was careful not to pass too close to his friend as he paced from one end of the siyul to the other. For himself, he doubted this room could ever again be a haven for peaceful contemplation and talk. Not after what had been spoken here over the last few hours.

Mr. Scott had arrived earlier that day with McCoy's report from the Surgeon General. After careful consideration and planning, Kirk and Spock had sent him back to contact every officer in the fleet who owed them a personal loyalty and to instruct them to use whatever methods they had at their disposal to gather evidence of the Rodinium Shield's illegal activities.

Kirk, who had never in his life been one to stay behind the lines and give directions while others took the risks, felt frustration at the prospect of having to remain inactive himself. But the operations could only be accomplished from within the Federation and, as Spock had spent several minutes explaining, for either of them to try to return at this time could provoke undue suspicion, in addition to being personally unsafe.

Kirk wondered what they were getting into. The odds against finding evidence against every corrupt man and woman in Star Fleet had to be... but it wouldn't do to dwell on that. "To hell with the odds!" Kirk growled to himself. It had been preordained, from the moment he'd taken that memo from Spock, that he was going to see this through - even if, as seemed likely, it took the remainder of his life.

He paused beside his companion, suddenly struck by the inappropriateness of what Spock was trying to accomplish.

"Spock, why don't you give in to it?" he asked.

The Vulcan looked up, frankly surprised. "Jim?"

"Consider a moment, what kind of commitment we've made. It's a handful of us, working against the most powerful forces in Star Fleet. We're going to need all the drive, all the strength hate can give us." His anger burst forth. "Haven't you got more reason for it than any of us? It's only because you recognized the damage in time, that the entire crew didn't die with the

Enterprise. And how have you been repaid? You've been disgraced, banished from your home planet, your mother's dead! What are your feelings about pushing the destruct button, now that you know you were forced into it?"

Spock turned his face back to the brazier, but it was not flames leaping behind grillwork he was seeing. He saw a flat, open plain, silvery grasses dotted with gray-green fieldstone and people in Star Fleet uniforms. Then, a sudden flash in the sky turning the powder-blue evening into searing white day... the total silence over hundreds of bowed heads as the light slowly faded...

The Vulcan shut his eyes against memory and firelight, and answered quietly. "We must not draw out strength from hatred, Jim. If we do, our longing for justice will inevitably degrade into a search for revenge."

Kirk was somewhat taken aback. "Is revenge so wrong?"

Composed onyx eyes met his again. "Very much, Jim. The fulfillment of justice will help to close many old wounds. Taking revenge will only tear them to fresh bleeding. It might be a momentarily pleasurable sensation, but in the long run, we would dislike ourselves for it. One must always consider the eventualities."

Spock's words were as gentle as they were adamant. Kirk looked at the floor tiles, feeling that abashed gratitude which always accompanied receiving a proper rebuke from the Vulcan.

"Then it's 'Thee and me against the world, and against our own lower instincts', " he amended and Kirk touched his shoulder. Spock responded with an understanding near-smile. Preventing hate from ruling them was a task promising to be very bit as demanding as convicting the Rodinium Shield, but, as both of them now realized, they must try to accomplish both.

They remained beside the fire until it had burned down to embers.



"Pepper steak, fried potatoes and 25 milliliters sake," Sulu told the selector. The mechanism hummed obligingly, and the slot opened to reveal the requested order. Commander Sulu lifted the tray and carried it toward a corner table, where the ship's records officer was seated alone. This attracted no notice from anyone in the recreation room. It was generally known aboard that the Eagle's first officer and Lieutenant-Commander Paul Messenger had some kind of 'understanding'.

Messenger had finished his own repast, and was busy smoking a short, brown Vetusian pipe. A filtering unit at his elbow scrupulously sucked in every stray wisp of smoke, to prevent it's drifting away to irritate others in the vicinity.

Messenger was an unlikely starship officer. At forty-eight, lack of vaulting ambition had kept him from achieving a higher rank, while total competence had protected him from transfer to a ground post. With his lined, angular face, grey-streaked brown hair and lean, strong hands, Messenger

looked very much like one of the Old-Way farmers of his home state, Maine. The resemblance was so enhanced by the pipe that Sulu might have suspected it was deliberate if he had not known putting on appearances was a trait totally absent from Messenger's character. His personality was reserved, taciturn, at times even grim, quite the opposite of the extroverted Sulu, and the younger man had often mused on the unlikeliness of their friendship.

It had been those very patriarchal qualities which had drawn Sulu to him. When the helmsman had first come aboard - a lonely, disillusioned young officer - unsure whether he ought to remain in Star Fleet at all, the records officer had helped give him the initiative to stay; he who had listened attentively whenever Sulu needed someone to talk to, and who had given him genuinely helpful advice about adjusting to his new environment. Gradually their relationship had developed into solid friendship, in some ways more meaningful than any Sulu had known aboard the Enterprise.

The heavy brown fragrance of pipe tobacco enveloped Sulu as he sat down.
"Good afternoon, Paul."

"Afternoon, Sulu." The records officer noticed the sake bowl. "Should you be drinking that between hours?"

"Only a quarter-liter. That won't do anything to me.... Well, not very much," he amended as the mild blue eyes met his.

"Might be wise to leave some of it, then."

Sulu grinned self-consciously, partially to mask his own uneasiness, stabbing at the potatoes with manufactured interest. It occurred to him, not for the first time in the last twenty-four hours, that he really knew very little about this man. He may already have given Messenger more information than was merited by his own, completely subjective trust in the records officer's integrity. 'Course, the risk would have to be taken sooner or later anyway - for that matter, this whole investigation was going to be a series of similar risks. He decided to follow it through now.

Sulu edged closer to the New Englander, keeping his voice quiet, although not low enough to attract attention. "Have you thought about... what I told you yesterday?"

Messenger's detached expression did not change, but the smoke from his pipe began to flow to the filter in a steady stream. "I have."

"Did you speak to the others, the ones you say know about what's been happening in Star Fleet"?

"They'll be in my cabin this evening. They'll want to hear it from you first-hand." He spoke as casually as though he were inviting Sulu to a chess match.

Sulu tried to pay some attention to his chewing, but the steak was flavorless in his mouth. "Could you tell me now, who 'they' are?"

"Dr. Wabisi, Ensigns Gogrej and Kebba, Yeoman Cruguet and Lts. Kasindorf and Behle."

"Kasindorf?" The commander's eyes narrowed dubiously. The transporter chief had manifested a stringent dislike for Sulu from the day the latter had come aboard.

"He's never had anything personal against you, Sulu." Messenger blew a long stream of smoke between his lips, indicating he was in a pessimistic frame of mind. He did half his communication via that pipe. "Nobody aboard's every offered to tell you about the officer you replaced, have they?"

Sulu blinked at this abrupt change of subject and shook his head.

"There's a reason. Captain de Bergquem never did have any love for First Officer Agrawal. Fact was, Agrawal was too popular for comfort. You probably don't know it, but by keeping yourself aloof from the crew, as you've been, you've kept your position safe."

An uncomfortable prickling moved up Sulu's neck. "Captain de Berquem eliminated his first officer?"

"Had him demoted and shipped back to the ore-freighters, with cooperation from a few friends at Command - returning a favor, more or less. There's no way for us to prove it, or the whole fleet would have heard about it long ago."

Sulu wondered how many people in Star Fleet must have similar stories to tell. "It's still hard for me to believe it of them sometimes. Men of their intelligence..."

"Intelligence, strength and courage aren't virtues of themselves as much as they are amplifiers. They'll all magnify a person's essential goodness, or essential evil. The dangerous aspect about the Rodinium Shield is that they've got all three...in abundance. If they had the right motivations, they'd be saints."

Sulu made no reply; none was needed, and he wanted to enjoy his present sense of relief. Some part of him which had been holding back had just given in; he knew he could give Messenger his total confidence from now on. The Resistance must be based upon such trust, else they would fail before they began. The former helmsman even managed to enjoy the remainder of his lunch until the intercom called all bridge personnel back to posts.

"We'll be seeing you after-hours, Sulu," Messenger reminded him as he got up.

"I'll be there." Sulu gave the New Englander a squeeze on the shoulder.

Messenger eyed him fondly until he was out of sight, then settled back to one of the most relaxing smokes of his life.



Kirk stepped directly from the warmly, lighted interior of the siyul, into the wilds of Eskar. A leevvar - one of those bitterly-cold windstorms originating from that planet's equivalent of the North Pole - was blowing this

evening. Kirk tugged his hood into place and strode into the dark, stirring landscape. Despite the low temperatures, he always felt more at home on Eskar at night, when the sky was an earth-like ink blue. But the stars looked much larger; on clear nights, every bit as bright as the twin moons.

The captain passed through the friendly-smelling hemlock grove and reached a faint foot-path leading over the black plain. It ran for two kilometers to one of the highland knolls of wind-carved rock which the natives referred to as a mezgain - a "savage place". On nights like this, when the scattered skaykoths were swaying ominously - like totem poles about to topple over - Kirk considered it a name suitable to the whole planet.

A brisk 20-minute hike brought him to the edge of his objective: something like an dense-packed version of Earth's Monument Valley. The grim, bulky monoliths glittered subtly varying shades of maroon and indigo in the fierce starlight. Kirk walked between them, feeling totally isolated among these motionless shapes, with the leevvar shrieking so loudly that he could barely hear his own footsteps. The cold stung his eyes but he forced them to stay open and search the landscape.

He sited the object of his search as he turned the corner of a building-sized chunk of stone. Thirty meters ahead, on the mezgain's apex, a humanoid figure stood, still as the rocks save for its cloak, undulating frantically in the head-wind.

"Spock?" To Kirk's ears the call sounded too muffled to carry more than a few meters, but he saw the apparition's head turn in his direction. Kirk started toward him, and Spock came down the stony path to meet him half-way.

"I thought I'd find you here," the captain gasped when they met, but the sense of urgency he'd started out with had been reduced by the hike. He paused to note how the monoliths were forcing the blasts into high-pitched howls. "What a racket that wind makes! It sounds like there's something screaming in there."

"The Eskarians are of the same opinion," Spock commented, his low voice easily carrying through the noise. "One of their legends tells of a race of benevolent winged humanoids called the Yetha, who once inhabited Eskar in peaceful abundance before another race, the Sepak, emerged from the cold regions and made war on them. All those Yetha who did not hide in the mezgains were exterminated. Those sounds are reputed to be the voices of the survivors calling to the Yetha who were left behind."

How typically melancholy the myth was. All Eskarian folklore seemed to be preoccupied with thwarted hope and lost happiness. Whether this was the cause or the effect of so many ruined lives immigrating to the planet Kirk could not decide.

"Have you a concern, Jim?" Spock's inquiry brought Kirk back to the present.

"Almarine Driscoll brought in our first set of messages about two hours ago. There's good news from Sulu. He's found a number of officers aboard the Eagle who want to join us. M'Benga has offered to be one of our contacts with the Surgeon General. He's presently trying to find out if there's anyone else

on the Republic who can be trusted. Uhura reports she can probably remove any file in Star Fleet Command without detection. She'll be delivering the originals to Sigrid Johannson, and sending duplicates of them to us so we can keep track of what's been secured..."

His voice broke off in a controlled shudder. The cold was seeping into him now that he was standing still. He marvelled that Spock, who was not dressed as heavily, seemed unaffected by it. The Vulcan's face, velvety black with royal blue highlights, was like an artist's study in tranquility.
"Spock, I have to confess, I often wonder if we should have started this. Just knowing it'll only take one mistake to bring everything crashing down on us... I'm glad one of us can bear it."

"I, too, am aware of the stress. There are certain methods which may be employed to reduce it."

"I don't think I'm up to wandering all over Eskar at night, if that's what you're referring to," Kirk grumbled, making a vigorous effort to stamp the numbness out of his feet.

"I have accomplished my purpose here, if you wish to start back," Spock offered. Kirk accepted at once. They both remained silent until they had left the amplified wailing of the mezgain far behind them.

"What is it that you do out here anyway?" Kirk finally asked.

"I find the mezgain a favorable environment for contemplation - for searching myself." Spock was looking upward to the western sky - toward stars of the Federation. Something intruded on the pacific of his eyes; some traces of painful memory.

"What's troubling you?" Kirk asked hesitantly, fearful of reawakening some old grief.

Spock lowered his gaze. "I wonder where my father is."

Kirk blinked. "Sarek? Isn't he on Vulcan?"

"He left Vulcan shortly after I did. I never found out where he went."

"Left? You mean, because of...what happened to you?"

"Yes." Spock stared at the ground as they walked, his expression one of deep shame.

Was there no end to the anguish Star Fleet had inflicted on him? Even as Kirk set a consoling hand on the Vulcan's shoulder, he felt his own fury rising. Hastily he thrust it down. *Hatred will inevitably degrade our longing for justice into a search for revenge...* Kirk was beginning to wonder if he was really capable of resisting the urge day after day, for as long as it would take to see this through.

"My friend, there is something I need to learn from you. How are you keeping yourself from hating those people for what they did to you?"



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The shadowed eyes that lifted to study his own were surprised, but Spock read his request as sincere. "By achieving a certain perspective. That is the most important benefit for which I come to this place. Rithame is the Vulcan for it; I do not know if there is any exact equivalent among Earth's philosophies." Spock's stare moved to the glittering void again, this time without reluctance. "I have done a certain number of things in my lifetime which are abhorrent to my sense of morality. But I have not come to hate myself for committing them, because I know that they are not all of me. Rithame consists of recognizing that this belief applies to all sentient life. When we come to realize that, while we live, we are all on the same level, that we are not better than our enemies, then there can be no resentment against any being ... only against their actions. It stands for the difference between justice and revenge."

Kirk's eyes had widened with a feeling of the profound. He had never heard Spock speak so... religiously before. "We do have a philosophy similar to that," he heard himself saying. "It's described as, 'Hating the sin but loving the sinner'."

Spock reduced the solemnity of the moment by raising a bemused eyebrow. "I had not encountered it. Which of your philosophers is that?"

"No single author. It's one of those anonymous ideals that everyone agrees is a good one, and nobody seems able to practice. Who originated the Rithame perspective? Surak?"

"T'Thame," Spock corrected.

"She would have been my second guess. What irony!" Kirk burst out. "Star Fleet was supposed to have been organized on some of her constructs; particularly her doctrine that strength should always be accompanied by gentleness."

"That standard has been disregarded regularly throughout history, and not only by our peoples. We may yet be hopeful, Jim. The lesson seems to have been remembered longer after each such chapter."

"Yes. We can hope." Kirk set his arm affectionately around his friend's shoulders, and Spock responded by giving him a near-smile. Jim considered that there had once been a time when Spock would have resented that personal touch. Now there could be no more denial or rationalizing of their friendship. After all their suffering, and everything they had lost, they had at least gained that....

Kirk's musing ended abruptly as a particularly ferocious Arctic blast roared right through his jacket. "Spock, I don't know about you, but this human is in a hurry to quit this region of high perspectives and philosophies and get back to one that's warm. Care to race me home?" Kirk invited affably.

Spock's eyebrow cocked, almost playfully, and they broke into a run simultaneously. The Vulcan could easily have outdistanced his companion, but preferred to hold himself back to a pace Kirk could match, so they sped over the remaining distance together. Neither attempted to talk further. Each was savoring the exhilaration of the icy air rushing into his lungs, the brilliant green glow over the horizon ahead which signaled the nearness of day, and the presence of the other at his side. The leeval continued to whirl about them, but there was a warmth between them no wind could chill.

Ivan Ruic, transporter chief of the Mithenvar,^{*} was drumming his fingers against his console, waiting to receive the coordinates for a shipment of medical supplies from the Eagle. Behind him the two stores personnel, equipped with anti-gravs, fidgeted with similar impatience. They interpreted the delay as yet another manifestation of the superior attitude so many Star Fleet officers expressed toward transport-ship personnel.

"Coordinates: 122, 134, 981," finally came over the intercom.

Ruic's calloused hand snapped the switches into place. "Got 'um."

"Energize whenever you're ready."

"I coulda gotten ready to beam yer whole damned ship aboard in the time you took," Ruic growled under his breath as he pulled the handles. Three massive shipping crates shimmered into existence on the platform, and the stores men groaned audibly.

"Standing by to receive back the transport acknowledgement," Ruic's counterpart aboard the Eagle briskly reminded.

Ruic pointed each crewman to a container, and was reaching for the ledger on top of the third crate, when a medium-built woman with short, dark hair darted in and plucked the ledger from under his outstretched hand. "Here, I'll take care of that, Ruic."

The transporter chief's expression soured even more. "I'm capable of handling it myself, Commander," he said sullenly.

Almarine Driscoll bit back the sharp reply his tone merited, reminding herself, for perhaps the millionth time, that the man had known a lot of hardship. "I don't doubt it, Lieutenant, but regulations require the acknowledgement to be signed by an officer of command grade."

Ruic bent over his crate, muttering something that sounded like a disparaging opinion of regulations. Almarine glared at him a moment, then pretended to give full attention to filing out the ledger. She waited until the men were fully occupied before carefully sliding a forefinger under the receipt. The usual half-pleasant, half-painful glow of excitement filled her stomach as she touched another, folded plasticine sheet beneath the first. A quick, precise flick of the finger and it was inside her sleeve.

"See to returning this, Lieutenant," she instructed, setting the properly signed ledger on the platform.

"Yes, M'am," he responded, with undue emphasis on the second word as she left the transporter room. It was a pleasure to get away from him. Star Fleet officers had never displayed such open resentment at taking orders from a woman, she reflected longingly, then sternly pushed the thought away. The past was the past.

She spotted a lanky, tow-headed man emerging from a doorway at the further end of the corridor and his smile of greeting dispelled much of the day's accumulated exasperations. When he waved her over, she came willingly.

* Predatory mammal indigenous to Vulcan

"Have you seen to the medical shipment, Commander?"

"Yes, Captain. All items accounted for." She spoke formally for the benefit of a couple passing engineers, but the captain discerned the correct meaning easily enough.

"Then, as the second shift has just ended, may I request the pleasure of your company in my cabin?" The captain offered her his arm. Almarine took it graciously, ignoring the knowing snickers of the engineers.

"I almost didn't get to it before Lt. Ruic did," she mentioned as they proceeded. "I had to stop and break up a squabble in the rec room. A couple of the storage techs."

"Malia and Amis again?"

Who else, her expression answered. Captain Driscoll knew his wife missed the better-disciplined environment of a Federation Star Fleet vessel. That whole inhuman mess following the Sigma 404 incident - a diabolical coincidence, that: a planet-wide revolt starting just as their ship had begun an ethnographic study there - had been hardest on her. She had been the one in charge of the landing parties, and had been courtmartialed for allegedly violating the Prime Directive. Her captain-husband had only drawn a fine and severe reprimand, but had voluntarily resigned his own commission to enter exile with her.

Then there had been those terrible, empty months before they'd found positions in Spock's transport fleet; endless drifting from one edge-of-nowhere to another, cut off from everything; never sure when they were going to get their next meal or locate a safe place to sleep. Those had been experiences designed to either strain a relationship beyond repair, or cement it into an unbreakable bond. Even though, in their case, it had done the latter, they both still found the memories of that time acutely painful. Sterling was grateful when they finally reached their quarters.

Once inside, he immediately activated the door's lock. "What did you get?"

"Don't know. I haven't had a chance to look 'til now," she answered, her voice a conspiratorial whisper, as she drew the paper from her sleeve. She had started to hand it to her captain when she remembered that they were equals in this room, and unfolded it herself. The scanned the contents together.

Sterling emitted an appreciative whistle. "Good thing Ruic didn't see that. If he ever got hold of any evidence against a Federation commissioner..." The mental picture of the vindictive Ruic prematurely blowing the cover off the entire conspiracy was so morbidly fascinating that it took several seconds for him to notice Almarine appeared unenthusiastic - even disappointed. "What's wrong, Moth?"

His wife determinedly shook off her melancholy. "Nothing, really. It's just that, every time we get one of these, I start hoping it might be about..." She didn't finish the sentence.. There was an unspoken agreement between them never to mention her courtmartial, or what they both knew about why the jury had convicted her.

Sterling stroked the side of her face. "Don't be concerned about it, Alma. The conspiracy'll probably locate evidence about that sooner or later, and if they don't, it'll come out after the clean-up begins. It doesn't really matter how long all this takes, if we're together in the meantime." His hand continued its ministrations against her shoulder. "You know," he remarked, leaning closer, "I didn't phrase the invitation that way in the hall entirely for the benefit of the spectators."

Almarine looked up, her lips curving into a sly smile. "Why, you sneaky d..." The tender insult was never completed. As she responded to his kiss the plasticine sheet drifted slowly to the floor.



Over the last few months, the siyul in Spock's home had acquired the same mystique as a Command Tent on a battlefield. All actions pertaining to the conspiracy were performed there; even such simple events as reading messages from the 'front'.

Kirk carefully returned their latest acquisition to its envelope. "So, we can add Commissioner Ferris to our list of known Shield-bearers. It seems he used rather irregular means to secure the Beta 400 mining treaty..." With a surge of irritation at himself, Jim wondered why he was speaking aloud. Spock had read the message hours before, while the captain had been out making a delivery run.

Kirk glanced over to the desk, where the Vulcan was running a stack of cassettes through the viewer, one by one. Probably trade records again. Kirk hadn't yet figured out how Spock managed to keep such close track of the conspiracy and run his export business efficiently at the same time.

"The Methenvar is scheduled to pick up a shipment from the Republic within three weeks. We may receive something from M'Benga at that time."

"Spock, couldn't you arrange for the Phoenix to make these rendezvous once in a while?"

"I could," Spock replied, looking up from his work, "but it might not be prudent. While we have no way of knowing how aware the Rodinium Shield is of our operatives' activities, it could only make the situation more precarious if Star Fleet Command receives reports of either of us making contact with Federation ships. The Driscolls have the advantage of considerably less notoriety."

The obvious logic of the argument did nothing to alleviate Kirk's sense of uselessness. From the beginning, he'd been experiencing periodic bouts of angry frustration, over his inability to perform any function for the conspiracy a secretary couldn't handle. Spock could at least contribute a superb talent for organization, but Kirk considered his own abilities better suited for front-line action. Here, he felt like a beached whale.

Kirk moved to the desk and pushed his fist against the proper panel. As the storage compartment obediently clicked open, he gave voice to his irritation.

"Just look at this! Seven months this has been going on and this is all we've managed to get a hold of!"

Spock eyed the slender stack of multicolored papers at which Kirk was waving a scolding finger. Tho fully aware Jim was only giving his frustrations an airing-out, Spock hoped to limit the length of it by remaining dispassionate himself. "Considering the obstacles involved in securing them, I would not say we have done poorly."

"And most of what is here is only rumors and implications," Kirk rambled on, unplaced. "We've got little hard evidence, almost none of it against any of the big fish."

"'Big fish', captain?"

"The ringleaders, dammit! Fitzgerald, Komack, Fitzpatrick; we've got virtually nothing on them!"

In the ringing silence that followed, Kirk was aghast to realize he had been bellowing. Spock did not appear shocked or hurt, only sympathetic; and Kirk suddenly felt deeply ashamed of himself. He had no right to be carrying on like this. Hadn't his very first commanding officer, Captain Garrovick, once told him the ability to tolerate forced inactivity was as important for a leader as any other trait? 'Because you'll be in that situation often enough, Jim.' Wasn't that the truth.

The amount of time this was taking was the thing really bothering Kirk. Even after one of their friends had taken God-alone-knew what kinds of risks to secure some bit of evidence, they might have to wait weeks or months for a chance to pass it on the Surgeon General, or to one of Spock's transport vessels. The big problem was there weren't enough operatives to give their communication channels a solid structure. With all the rebels forced to be so cautious about taking on any recruits, the conspiracy's rate of expansion was dishearteningly slow.

Well, he'd been warned about that, too.

"Discouragement may be our single greatest adversary." Sigrid Johannson would know that better than anyone. How long must she have been waging this battle all alone?

Kirk deposited the envelope in the compartment and pushed it shut. "Do you ever get the impression that we'll probably both be candidates for two-meter plots before this is over, Spock?" he remarked tiredly.

"My perspective on such matters necessarily differs from your own, Jim. Vulcans live..." Uncharacteristically, Spock cut himself off and bent over his view again, but Kirk knew what he'd been about to say. *Vulcans live longer than humans.*

And that was true. Even with the human factors of his physiology taken into account it was probable that Spock would see at least twice as many years as Kirk; certainly enough to finish the job on his own. But all Kirk's concern over conspiratorial matters was suspended as he pondered another implication; *Why does Spock allow himself to become so attached to me when he knows it's virtually certain he's going to outlive me?*

Spock did not look up to acknowledge his friend's troubled scrutiny. Somehow, Kirk knew that this was one subject he would never be able to coax Spock into discussing. Or, if he did, it would only turn into a lot of pseudo-logical double-talk.

That line of thought was getting uncomfortable. The captain looked at the chronometer over the desk and saw that it was nearly midnight. The observation seemed to bring out his fatigue in force. "I am sorry, Spock. It's just these late hours that are getting to..."

A series of clear notes sounded in the next room, door chimes.

The two men exchanged an alert glance. Neither of them had been expecting any visitors tonight. Nor had T'Prenn, who'd retired hours ago.

Without a word, Spock rose and walked into the living room. Kirk, his weariness forgotten, followed as far as the siyul door and posted himself just within it.

Suppose it was a Federation squad come to arrest them? They hadn't any contingency plans for that. Bad oversight. He looked toward an ornamental hand-ax hanging on the wall beside him, but even as he did, his stomach turned. He snapped his eyes back to Spock, praying fervently that it wouldn't come to that.

The Vulcan crossed the last few meters to the door, which was set at an angle allowing Kirk a partial view of what was beyond it. He could also see the latter edge of Spock's profile as he paused, no doubt reviewing his own defensive plan in case it turned out to be them. Finally, Spock reached to the control panel, as Kirk's hand reflexively gripped the ax-handle. Futile! Against phasers...!

A single figure - tall, cloaked, and apparently unarmed - was standing in the dark hallway. What the captain could see of Spock's expression did not change, but the Vulcan stiffened visibly. Kirk studied the two intently, unsure whether or not to relinquish his hold on the ax.

Then the figure stepped forward into the light, and Kirk gasped in astonished recognition. Although greyer, and more gaunt than the last time he'd seen it, that face was still unmistakable.

The figure's right arm lifted, hand spread into a double-fingered V. Glubegk enkov, arlamank^{*} Spock."

Rigid with barely-controlled emotion, Spock raised his own hand in the same configuration. Not even his control could mask a slight tremor in his voice as he replied, "Glubegk enkov...Sarek of Vulcan."

...to be continued...

* Vulcan; a term of deep respect.



BROTHER of the HEART

By: Marion McChesney

Art by: Barbara Gordon

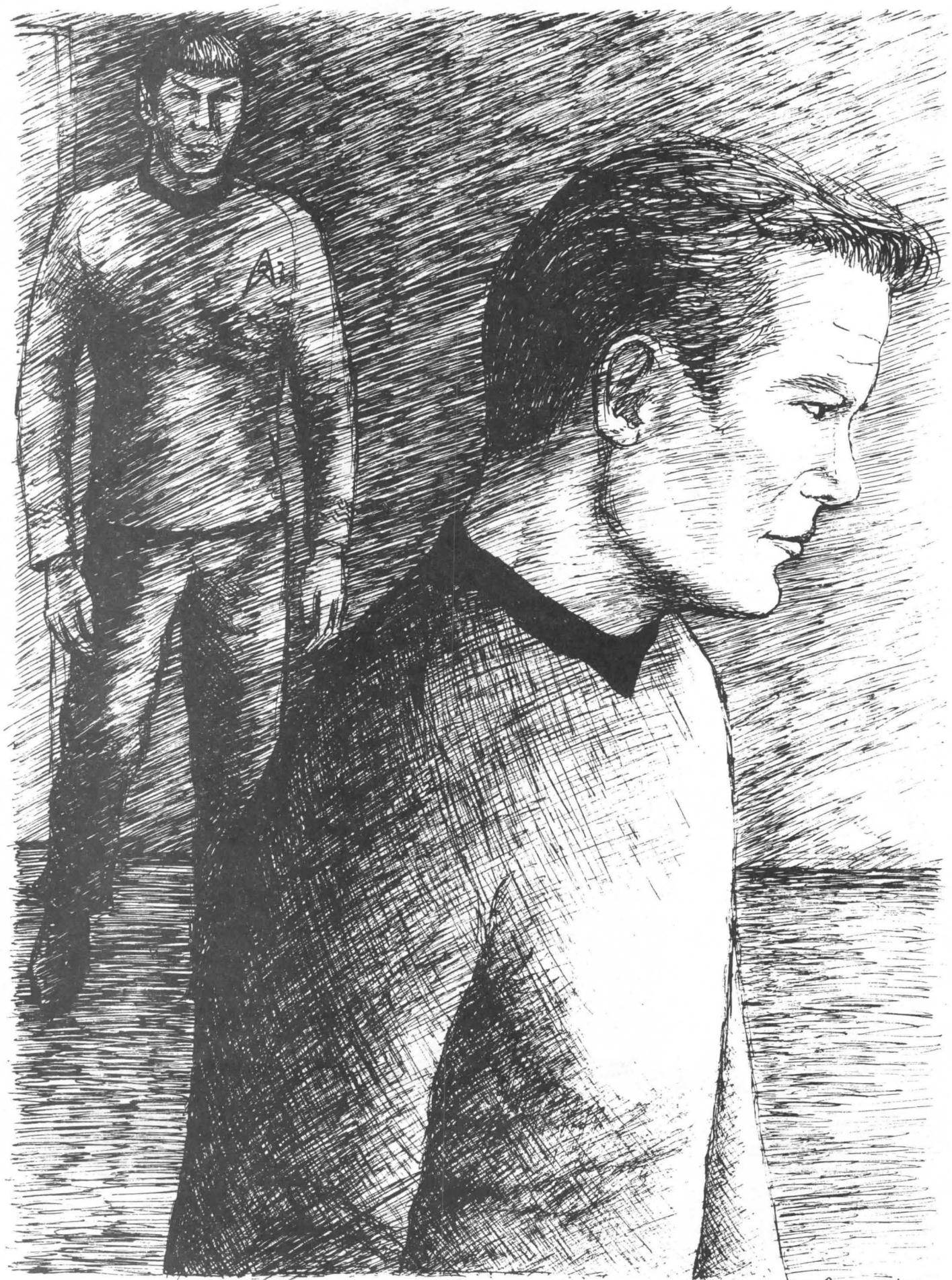
Once Deneva had been called the most beautiful planet in the galaxy, but its beauty was marred by the smell of death and the aftermath of a million people's agony. The parasites were destroyed, but in their wake more than twenty thousand lay dead, including Kirk's brother Sam and his family. Thousands more had been rendered insane. Now it was time for Deneva to pick up the pieces and go on. The Enterprise was ordered back to regular patrol duty.

Long after Deneva faded from view, Kirk still stared at the viewscreen. He clenched the arms of his chair, limbs leaden with defeat. After a while, he turned over the con to Uhura and went to his quarters.

Exhausted physically and emotionally drained, he fell asleep almost immediately, but it was not a peaceful sleep. It was haunted by images of the creatures. He was being chased down pasageways that narrowed as he went. Shaken awaken by the imagined impact of one on his back, he bolted upright in bed, trembling.

He slowly became aware of his surroundings, and drew his knees up to his chest, burying his head between them. All other obligations were gone now and he was free at last to mourn the death of his brother. Peter, his nephew, had also succumbed to the creatures. Though he had been freed, the shock to his system had proven fatal. Kirk swung his legs over the side of the bed and buried his head in his hands. He let the grief he had kept inside free and wept for all he had lost until there were no more tears left. Then there was just one more task to be performed. The last thing he could do for Sam.

The dimly lit corridors were empty and he was thankful for that. He did not wish to see anyone. The door opened and he entered a room that was dark but for the small light glowing in a corner alcove. The floor was covered with a thick carpeting that muffled the sound of his footsteps. He approached the light. Fixing his eyes on its center, he spoke. His voice was low.



B.P. Gordon 3/84

"Are you really here? I'm not so sure anymore. Do you really exist or are you just something we invented out of our fear?" He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Head bowed, he began the ancient prayer.

"And now, I pray thee, let the power of the Lord be great, according as thou hast spoken. Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy loving kindnesses: for they have been ever of old.

Magnified and sanctified be his great name in the world which he hath created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom during your life and during your days, and during the life of all the house of Israel, even speedily, and at a near time, and say ye, Amen.

Let his great name be blessed for ever and all eternity.

Blessed, praised and glorified, exalted, extolled and honored, magnified and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be he: though he be high above all the blessings and hymns, praises, and consolations, which are uttered in the world; and say ye, Amen.

Let the name of the Lord be blessed from this time forth and for evermore.

May there be abundant peace from Heaven, and life for us and for all Israel; and say ye, Amen.

My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

He who maketh peace in his high places, may he make peace for us and for all Israel; and say ye, Amen.

As he spoke, his mind became more peaceful and he felt the grief and futility of the past few days drain from him until finally all that remained was a kind of sweet sadness, for Sam and the others...and for himself as well.

"Peter was the last." He seemed to speak to the empty room. "There's no one left now...no family to say the prayer for me when my turn comes." He sighed.

"Yes, there is, Jim." The familiar voice startled Kirk and he spun around.

Spock stepped from the shadows, a hand outstretched to his friend.

And Kirk smiled.





Soren '84

QUESTIONS

by: Betsy L. Barr

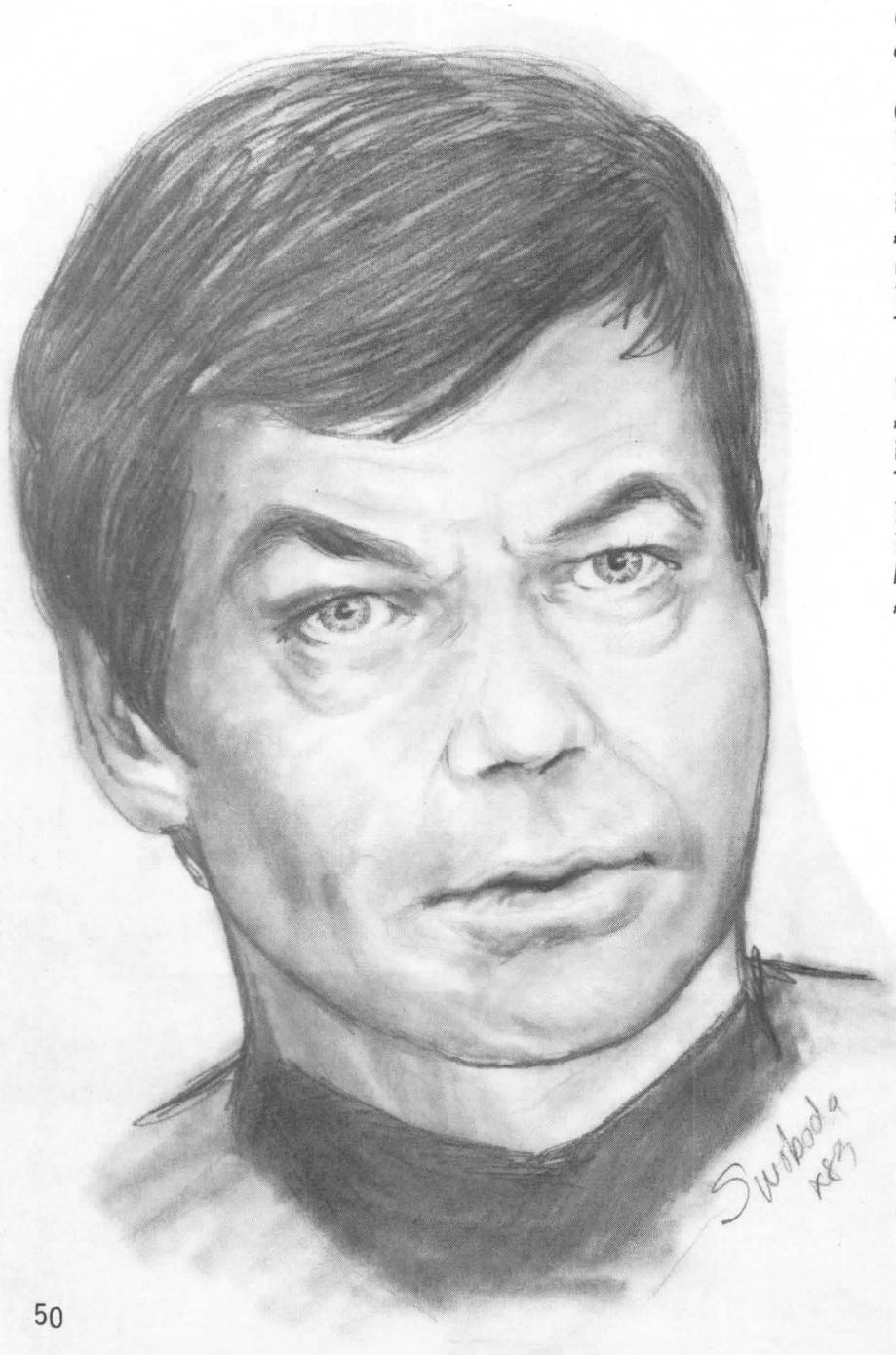
Art by: Suzan Lovett

What did the empath see
when she touched your shoulder
and looked into your heart?
Seeing you, in an unguarded moment
looking down at your sleeping Captain.
Did she understand
that you had chosen
pain and insanity freely
to spare your friend, the Doctor?
Did she find relief in your mind
that your Captain had been freed
of the decision
between his two best friends?
And your uncomfortable
almost guilty expression,
turning away when discovered-
Could it be, that
behind those cold and guarded
Vulcan eyes
she had discovered
love?
And is that
what made her smile?



McCoy's Lament

by: Carole Swoboda



Have these weary blue eyes
become much too tired
to find death and destruction
time and again?

Of seeking new cures
Against the impossible;
Of watching young men
and women in pain?

Oh I cover these eyes
For I fear what's to come.
I am always repairing
Each one that needs mending,
As each battle brings
bleeding and dying through Sickbay
In long pain-filled lines
That seem never ending.

Yet this weariness drops,
And I'm thankfully grateful,
Each time that I help one
To keep living longer.
For to save that one life
From the last fatal darkness
Makes these tired eyes smile ...
And I go on much stronger.



by: Ingrid Cross

Art by: Carole Swoboda

He and Scotty saw Jim coming at the same moment and moved with uncanny precision. They grabbed the admiral's arms, pulling him back, away from the nightmare in the reactor room. McCoy knew he was clinging to Jim partly out of the need to hold him back, but mostly to feel someone else close.

"No!" he heard himself say distantly. "You'll flood the whole compartment!"

"He'll die in there!"

"Die? He's dead already," Scotty said brokenly.

"It's too late." McCoy watched Kirk as he said that, seeing the truth slap his friend in the face and knew at that moment that he had failed them all. Failed Jim, failed Spock, failed the whole damned universe. His arms fell, and he knew Jim was aware of the risks, that Jim knew he could not go to Spock without committing murder on the whole damn lot of them.

Failed them all, McCoy's mind echoed sickeningly.

Kirk moved away slowly, toward the glass walls separating all of them from the lone figure in red. Echoes bounced through McCoy's mind without his awareness, echoes of guilt and pain and something...indefinable. Part of him was with Jim, hearing what his friend shouted through the speaker to Spock. Most of him shut down. His knees shook and he was suddenly thinking about an amusement park he had been to as a kid - where one ride went so fast and when he'd gotten off the ride, his legs no longer remembered their function and he fell down flat on his face and he was sure that was going to happen now dear god not now! and he wondered why his face was wet.

"...grieve, Admiral. The needs of the many outweigh..."

"...the needs of the few." Kirk was saying. McCoy thought it sounded like a code between the two of them, and for a swift cutting moment he felt an irrational jealousy at the thought that the two of them could share something like that now as he stood here, alone, again as always.

"Or the one." He saw Spock shake his head and reality swam out of focus. He couldn't see through the damn glare in the room and his ears were filled with the sounds of something in the past, something important he should be recalling. By the time he refocused, Spock had slid to the floor. He knew miserably he had missed something terribly important, something Jim would never share with him. It was gone, and he felt guilty again, thinking that some vital information had passed between the two of them and he would need to know what it was for later, when everything was...over.

He was dimly aware that Scotty was holding him up, one strong but shaky arm around his waist and the other moving around him to hold him in a clumsy embrace. Scotty was saying something to him that he couldn't hear - his attention riveted on Jim and Spock, both on the floor, separated only by a thin sheet of protective glass and Spock's words came back at him in a delayed reaction

needs of the many

and then he laughed bitterly, softly, thinking, 'You've gone and done it now, Spock. You've done yourself in pretty damn good, and what the hell kind of philosophy was that? Vulcan? Human? Nothing is worth what you've done. We don't deserve it, not like this, Spock, damn you!'

I don't deserve it. Failed them, failed them, failed....

Another part of his mind shut down and he pulled his eyes away from that frozen tableau -- Jim sitting broken and blank-faced on the floor, back against the glass -- and he looked over at the silent engineers and techs lining the room. Their faces were awed, and most of them were crying. That's when he realized that someone had to pull himself together and do something. Command went on, the chain could not be broken. 'Not now,' he thought. 'Gotta get Jim out of here and do something about all these people...and about the body.'

He pushed Scotty's hands away and turned to his old friend. "Scotty," he said in a harsh whisper, forcing the other man to face him and focus on his words.

"Scotty, we've got to get these people outta here. Now," he emphasized, nodding his head toward Kirk. He didn't want to look at that scene in the corner of the room, too unsure of his own emotions. Resonances pulled in the shadows of his mind, rolling towards the center of his brain with growing circles. And somewhere deep inside his soul, anger pushed upwards, held back only by the need to perform rituals and duties. Held in check by the desire to clear all these damned spectators out of here and flush the radiation and get the body out -- 'what arrangements to be made?' he asked himself on one level -- and do it all smoothly, with the least trauma to everyone concerned.

Scotty nodded and moved away, ushering people out quietly, as easily as he could. McCoy watched for a second, then moved toward the intercom unit. As he reached for the switch, his eyes went automatically to that scene and guilt knifed through him sharply again. He could see Jim struggling to stand, looking lost and vulnerable. Jim finally stood shakily and McCoy made a move to go over to help him, but froze when the admiral pushed his chin forward and straightened the tunic in a gesture so reminiscent of Spock that it choked McCoy.

Kirk moved steadily across the room, stopped near the door where Scotty was, and spoke maybe one sentence that the doctor could not hear from his position. Then he walked out of the room, never looking back.

'Bastard,' McCoy thought distantly. 'Damn you, Kirk! It wasn't necessary...'

Something hit him then and his mind went completely blank with the force and power of it. His hand moved to his forehead and he couldn't remember for a minute what had happened, thought that he was having a bad dream (too much Romulan ale?), maybe he was getting sick; that was it. There was something not quite right about all this...

Gradually, he became aware of his surroundings, of Scotty looking at him anxiously and calling his name insistently.

"Leonard? Come on!"

The two of them were alone in the vast room and McCoy noticed clinically, detachedly, that Scotty did not look at all well, looked downright scared as a matter of fact, and over what? Then he realized that his friend was concerned for him and knew he'd been standing here like this for several minutes, motionless, powerless to move. The anger started coming back full-force.

"Leonard? Are ye all right?"

He glanced over to the chamber where Spock still sat, propped against the wall. The Vulcan seemed asleep, and then he recalled everything, could recall in instant detail what had just happened.

Grief and pain and guilt returned, and he pulled away from Scotty's anxious hand and smiled grimly. "Fine, Scotty. I'm fine. Let's get Sp-- Let's get him out of there."

As he started to move, the pressure of pure anger and a slight pain in the depths of his mind kept propelling him, helping him do what he had to as friend, doctor, and your basic clean-up man.



There were too many people milling around him after the funeral -- people he did not care to see right now. McCoy pushed his way to the door, letting a little of the anger come up again to push the sorrow aside. He did

not want to deal with that right now either. The anger helped him see all the sharp details around him, which he needed to keep a clear head. He looked over at Kirk, who was talking quietly to Saavik in a corner of the room. He wondered idly what comfort the admiral could possibly offer to the girl, who was clutching her half-Vulcan heritage to herself tightly, a shield against the rampaging emotions aboard the Enterprise. Sadly, he could sympathize more with her than with Kirk.

The funeral had been a farce, in the doctor's opinion. That was it, plain and simple. "We won't dispute the wisdom of his actions in these proceedings." Hah! 'Of course we won't,' McCoy thought. 'We might come to some rather frightening conclusions, eh, Jim-boy?'

He side-stepped Uhura and some other crewmembers he did not recognize, politely and absently accepting their words of sympathy and concern.

"A legend," he had heard whispered throughout the ship whenever he had passed tight clumps of people the night before. He had taken to pacing the ship's corridors when his quarters became too confining. All of it fueled his anger: the nods and gentle smiles when he approached, and then the muted whispers as he passed them, about the legend that the admiral, their instructor, and McCoy had become over the years.

'Some legend,' McCoy snorted as he finally managed to leave the missile room. 'One man dies -- and for what? -- and when the two survivors are left, comfort is impossible to find in each other.'

That hurt the most. He had been able to talk to Kirk only via intercom last night. Jim had been forcibly cheerful, apparently adopting the attitude of "let's get on with life, let's keep moving for God's sake." To be kind, McCoy had to believe that Jim just couldn't deal with anyone else's grief right now. At least that's what he hoped was going on.

Another part of McCoy knew that if he had been able to confront Jim the night before, things better left for another time would have been brought out. Left for a time when the gut-tearing emotions over Spock were further away.

McCoy heard his name called down the corridor and stopped reluctantly. Scotty came pounding up to his side, a little out of breath.

"Leonard."

"Scotty," McCoy said politely. He wanted nothing more than to go to Sickbay and find something to keep himself busy. Anything, he guessed, to avoid thinking about the funeral.

Scotty seemed to look him over carefully, gauging his mood. "A group of us -- the older ones, really, those who were around when...well, during the five-year missions..." Scotty hesitated. "We're holdin'" a wake of sorts for Spock, Leonard. We'd -- ach, I -- would like you there."

An eyebrow climbed. "A wake? For Spock?" He considered the notion for a moment, then nodded. "Makes sense, I suppose. Although he'd think it was damned illogical."

Scotty smiled thinly. "Aye, I know, Leonard. But it seems that some of us require it. To ease the passin', you know." Again, there was an odd look from Scotty: an assessment of McCoy? the doctor wondered tiredly.

He sighed and knew he should go. If for nothing more than it would do him good to be with people. "All right, Scotty. I'll be there. When?"

"In an hour. We're holdin' it in Rec 3, Leonard." Scotty smiled gently and moved away, stopped by McCoy's low voice.

"Did you ask Jim to come?"

Scotty looked McCoy directly in the eye. "I asked, Leonard. I dinna think he'll be comin'. The admiral has a look about him that makes me think of a man who has seen too much. He said somethin' about it bein' a fine idea, but he had other duties."

McCoy left the matter there and nodded in answer. The two separated and the pain in McCoy's heart uncoiled a little more, to be fed by the flinty cold deep in his mind.



He did not regret the decision to attend the wake. Uhura, Scotty, Sulu and Chekov were there, bantering memories and incidents around as though they had just occurred. There was a fair amount of reminiscing about their mutual friend - tempered by plentiful liquor - so nothing became too maudlin. It was a wake in the true tradition of McCoy's Scottish forebears in which he found a soothing comfort.

Uhura smiled sadly and raised her glass high. "A toast," she said, her voice choked with tears. "I propose a toast."

The others did the same and waited for her words. McCoy, arm high in the air, smiled at her encouragingly, and suddenly something in his brain went "click!" and opened a door that had been recently closed.

The sensations pouring through his mind were not disturbing, really, he admitted distantly, unaware of the others' actions. They were pleasurable, more like a gentle wind blowing through his mind, stirring thoughts that had lain dormant and forgotten for so long. It was a combination of memories about Spock, about the first five-year mission ("It takes more than five years to get to know me," he was telling Spock with a grin. "Damn near half your life-span." And Spock half-smiled in reply, saying as he had 12 years ago, "You are not so difficult a 'nut to crack' as you would have me believe, Doctor") -- and something beyond that. He felt shaky all of a sudden, uncertain what was occurring around him, dimly hearing the memory-voices and overlaid with the textures of Spock's voice, his teasing days ago: "Really, Doctor, you must learn to govern your passions."

"Damn," he said out loud, coming back to reality quickly, aware that Uhura and Scotty were exchanging looks and Chekov was reaching across to put his hand on his forearm.

"Doctor?"

There was something in there that needed to come out...as though he had a forgotten piece of information on the tip of his tongue and couldn't quite spit it out. McCoy shook his head, seeing quick images racing through his brain cells at lightning speed, coalescing into the image of...of what? He slammed his open palm against the tabletop, causing Scotty to move quickly to his side.

"Leonard?"

He vaguely sensed an undercurrent running through the room and as if he had suddenly acquired heightened sensitivity to the thoughts of others, he knew everything. From Chekov he got graces of lingering pain from the episode with Khan and those damnable creatures ("he put...creatures...in our ears..."). From Uhura, images of a seagoing vessel listing the wrong way, tilting too far over ("Mr. Spock...it's how we all feel"). Sulu, caught up in terrible remorse that he should have seen Spock leave the bridge; maybe he could have stopped....

From Scotty, he received the strongest impression, perhaps because the others' immediate concern was an echo of the engineer's: "If Leonard goes under, what will happen? He's by no means the strongest, but he holds most of us together. And we need that now, by all the gods."

McCoy pressed his hands to his temples hard, forcing the unwanted and unbidden thoughts away. The images receded to the background, as though he had slammed a door again...but the echoes remained, throbbing.

He looked up with blank eyes at Scotty, pain and anguish blending into a tight-lipped mask of disbelief. "Scotty? Dammit all, Scotty, why? Why did he do it? It wasn't a matter of 'the needs of the many'! Can't Jim see that? Spock didn't have to die, and you know it as well as I do!"

He heard Uhura gasp and pushed on. He sat erect, Vulcan-like, the fingertips of one hand touching the tips of the other, leaning forward and looking up at Scotty still. "Where was the special team, Scotty? Where? They're trained to handle emergencies...their lives are expendable! That's what they're paid to do. Forget all the sentimental rhetoric of Jim's fancy speech a while ago -- there was no reason...no logic...in the whole mess!"

Scotty's face blurred above him and the room began to spin. His friend reached down a long tunnel to where he was (*govern your passions*, a small voice insisted, harsher than Spock had originally said. *Doctor!* came the voice again, more demanding) and touched him on the shoulder. A wave of emotions, concerns and jumbled thoughts poured through him, over some invisible watershed, and he jumped back out of his chair, backing away from Scotty in sudden terror at the feel of all those pains and torments.

"Stay away from me!" he practically screamed, the echoes of his voice bouncing back at him in the large room. "Don't touch me, any of you!" *Doctor*, that voice thundered in his brain. *Cease this, Now.*

Scotty moved forward slowly, his hands out but not attempting to touch McCoy, anxious concern written on his face. McCoy had backed himself against the wall and felt his body begin to shake. He marveled at the explosion he had created and felt immediate regret. "Scotty...I'm...I'm sorry. Uhura...Sulu, Chekov, really...I'm all right. I'm sorry. I don't know..."

Scotty seemed a bit relieved, but still moved cautiously forward. "It's been a rough few days, Leonard," he said softly. "Come now; sit down and relax."

He shook his head. "No, I can't," he said quietly. "I've got to..." 'Got to what? What do I have to do?' he asked himself. The answer flitted through his mind so quickly that he lost sight of it instantly, but the response calmed him, forced him to stand straight and smile at the others. "God, I'm sorry."

Uhura and the others murmured something he could not concentrate on -- the echoes were building up and reverberating inside to the point where he knew he'd better get himself out of the room and someplace private. He wasn't sure, but he had a good idea that he was losing control and he had a strong desire to be alone when it happened. He felt as though something had snapped completely in his mind, had detached itself from normal paths and was reassembling into something strange and frightening.

"I think I'll just walk around out there," he heard himself say with amazing normalcy. "I'm all right. And...I am sorry, Scotty."

Scotty smiled, reassured by the look on the doctor's face. "Ach, Leonard. No need to apologize. Perhaps the whiskey hit you with phaser power."

"Yeah," McCoy said, trying desperately to sound sane and knowing he was slipping off the edge. "Probably the whiskey. Y'all go back and sit down. I'll be fine." Seeing the looks of lingering distrust, he added lightly, "I'll probably be back in a little while. Don't worry."

He edged himself out of the room and practically ran to the 'lift, where he managed to give directions to the computer for his quarters.



'Think it through,' he told himself as he lay on his bed, arms wrapped around his stomach as he tried to control the shaking that just would not stop. He felt icy cold inside, through all his bones and every nerve ending. He had turned his cabin heat up, way up, but it wasn't doing any good.

He examined the problem as best he could. Although he felt calmer than when he had been with Scotty and the rest, he could find no explanation for that sudden snapping sensation earlier. He was sane, though.

He had to believe that.

Taking mental inventory had been easier than he had expected. He had forced himself to remember every detail of the past week or so - since the time of the training drill, the Kobayashi Maru test, the encounters with the madman Khan, and all the rest. There was not a single blank spot in his mind, which he took as an encouraging sign - a notice to his psyche that all was well.

Everything was there. All the minute details of Spock's death were implanted in his memory.

Even the mind meld.

He closed his eyes and could hear himself trying to dissuade Spock from going into the reactor chamber; the way Spock had turned away

Perhaps you are right, Doctor....

and then rounded back on him, hand outstretched -- and the sudden stinging pain of the Vulcan neck pinch. Even now he could feel the abrupt nausea, the sinking feeling that Spock had finally gone and done it on him, for God's sake! And the instinctual attempt to fight the descending unconsciousness because he knew Spock was buying time for his assinine attempt. He could even remember the sensation of Spock's hot, dry fingertips pressed against his temples and a sudden onrush of thoughts and feelings

attend

and then the first echoes, pushed firmly into his brain and set into motion with that one word: "Remember."

McCoy puzzled over the way Spock had said it: a command. A demand that he pay attention and get it right. Desperation mixed with urgency-the need to push it all in, stuff the message into the cranial cavity with savage power.

Teeth chattering, McCoy turned to the next obvious question. What the hell did Spock want him to remember? Again he had the feeling of lost information hovering just out of his reach before some faraway door slammed closed. He pounded his fists on the bed, moaning and shocked at the sound of it.

Goddamn, what was going on here? What could have been so all-fired important that Spock would go into his mind and hide something there? How logical could that be?

And what had happened in the rec room? He wondered at the telepathic charges he had picked up from Scotty when the man touched him, the way he could feel everyone's thoughts like a shot of electrical current. His mind harkened back to the episode on Minara, the way all his pain and tortured agony had been drawn out of him into Gem's body. The incident with his friends had been like that, in a way -- but stronger, more vital.

McCoy rolled onto his stomach and put his head into his arms. He could not find the answers. 'Not now,' he thought dismally. Maybe what Spock had told him didn't "take." Lord knew Spock had been under strain, and McCoy was certified null on all telepathic testing -- Spock had known that. For once Spock had made a swift, uncalculated action and the effort had been a waste. Maybe Spock had panicked, had meant to give Scotty the implanted information and instead had to settle on Leonard McCoy.

There was another possibility: maybe his emotional state now was thwarting the memories, pushing it all into the background. "Your passions will be your undoing, Doctor," came the hissing thought of a memory-snake. He pushed that away resolutely and sat up.

McCoy closed his eyes and tried to push everything out of his immediate thoughts; tried to clear the mental decks and let whatever it was out and into the open. If it was insanity, at least that could be dealt with. He was tired of the ever-increasing, growing circles of echoes that eluded his grasp and threatened to push him into a darkness immeasurably thick.

For a long time, nothing happened. McCoy relaxed and chuckled. 'Of course nothing will happen,' he chided himself. 'You're over-tired, almost burned out by everything that's happened.' Scenes from the past few days replayed themselves: the training session on the bridge ("what do you think of my performance?"); the rat startling him...blood everywhere; the Genesis machine, beaming away from them, into the hands of Khan; Spock, lying alone and unaided in the reactor room, sinking to the floor, blinded eyes closing with finality

remember

...a new planet appearing out of the ruin and chaotic explosion of Reliant, gathering to itself a cohesion of matter, harnessing the energy of the explosion, life sparking into existence in seconds...

needs of the many outweigh

...the coffin containing Spock's body moving away from them, accompanied on its journey by the sweetly mellow tones of bagpipes, jettisoning into space on a course for that planet...

Doctor

Not now, Spock, McCoy answered wearily. I just can't deal with your haranguing me right now. I'm busy. Go away.

That is patently impossible at this point, Doctor. Where shall I go?

Aw, hell, I don't care. I'm tired. Gotta sleep. 'This wasn't helping,' McCoy thought sleepily. 'Nothin's comin', like I hoped it would. Everything is just happening as a result of an overactive imagination. Spock isn't here -- he's dead. Dead and gone. Dead as a doornail. Deader than a dog....

Colorful but untrue, Doctor. I require your assistance, if you would.

Oh for heaven's sake.... McCoy began to sputter back at the memories, then his eyes opened and he sat up straighter, knocking his head against the wall.

"Ow!" he hollered as panic set in. What in blazes was going on around here? Spock was dead, shot away into black space, sent on his lonely way with Kirk's insensitive remarks as final taps. If he hadn't known that he was sane, he would have thought that....

"No!" he told himself firmly. This was ridiculous. There was no way on God's green earth that the little voice in his head could be Spock. Maybe that's what he wanted, but it wasn't true. He had examined the body himself -- insisting on that final right as physician and friend -- and there had been no heartbeat. All life readings indicated flat-line: brain, heart, all vital organs registering nothing. He had covered the body himself with the obligatory sheet, had signed all the documents, helped with the arrangements...in short, he had done all he could for what was left of his friend.

What he heard in his mind was simply a desire...an emotional wish that all the events of the previous day were a dream and he could just wake up and find it was all a hideous lie of an overactive imagination and too much Saurian brandy.

He stood up, willing the shakiness away, straightening his tunic and moving for the door. He had work to do; wounded children still required his ministrations in Sickbay; he had a routine to settle back into. Leonard McCoy's life went on, despite the loss, despite the pain and anger he felt at Jim's behavior.

And Spock was dead.

It grieves me to inform you that you are wrong, Doctor.

"Stop it! Just stop it!" he shouted at that insidious voice inside his mind that sounded suspiciously like Spock. "Leave me alone!"

As you wish.

A passage somewhere deep inside his brain closed, banged shut, and McCoy signed with relief. "That's the end of that," McCoy said aloud. He straightened his shoulders and headed for Sickbay.



Later, after McCoy returned to Sickbay, his mind mulled over new developments. They had left the orbit of the Genesis Planet, as everyone seemed inclined to call it. Jim's attitude of cheerful optimism -- "I feel young" -- had grated irrationally on McCoy's nerves. It had been enough to set his teeth on edge, despite his best efforts to contain the reaction. Spock was dead, and Kirk would go on, just like always? The doctor doubted it and a small part of him was worried over this casual acceptance. But the anger over Kirk's flippancy was stronger.

He sank into his desk chair and reached over to activate the computer linkup, determined to do some work. But his mind wandered again as he pushed buttons to call up data as he remembered with cold clarity his own words on the bridge.

"He's not really dead, you know...not as long as we remember him."

A chill jolted his body as he said that. There was a quick glimpse of warm emotion tempered by the memory of Spock's husky voice

remember

and then he was back on the bridge, watching the planet recede. He had turned and left the bridge without speaking to anyone.

McCoy turned back to the computer and refocused his attention on the data moving across the screen. He frowned and leaned forward to slow the rate, wondering idly who had tampered with his equipment.

An eyebrow rose and he cursed when he read the displayed material. He stopped the reader and pulled the tape out with a savage gesture. "What the hell? 'Astrophysical Concerns in Conjunction with Project Genesis'?" He sorted through the tapes on the desk top, reading the titles with growing horror.

"'Mathematical Probabilities....' 'The Marcus-Marcus Theory of Planetary Rejuvenation.'" Cold fingers moved down his spine and his forehead broke out with icy sweat. He rubbed his hands over his face and tried to rationally consider the possibilities.

There are always possibilities.

He brushed everything off his desk in sudden fear, watching the stack of tapes and papers fall to the floor in colorful array. None of the titles on the computer readouts and tapes involved medicine...not one of them contained information relevant to the Chief Surgeon's experience.

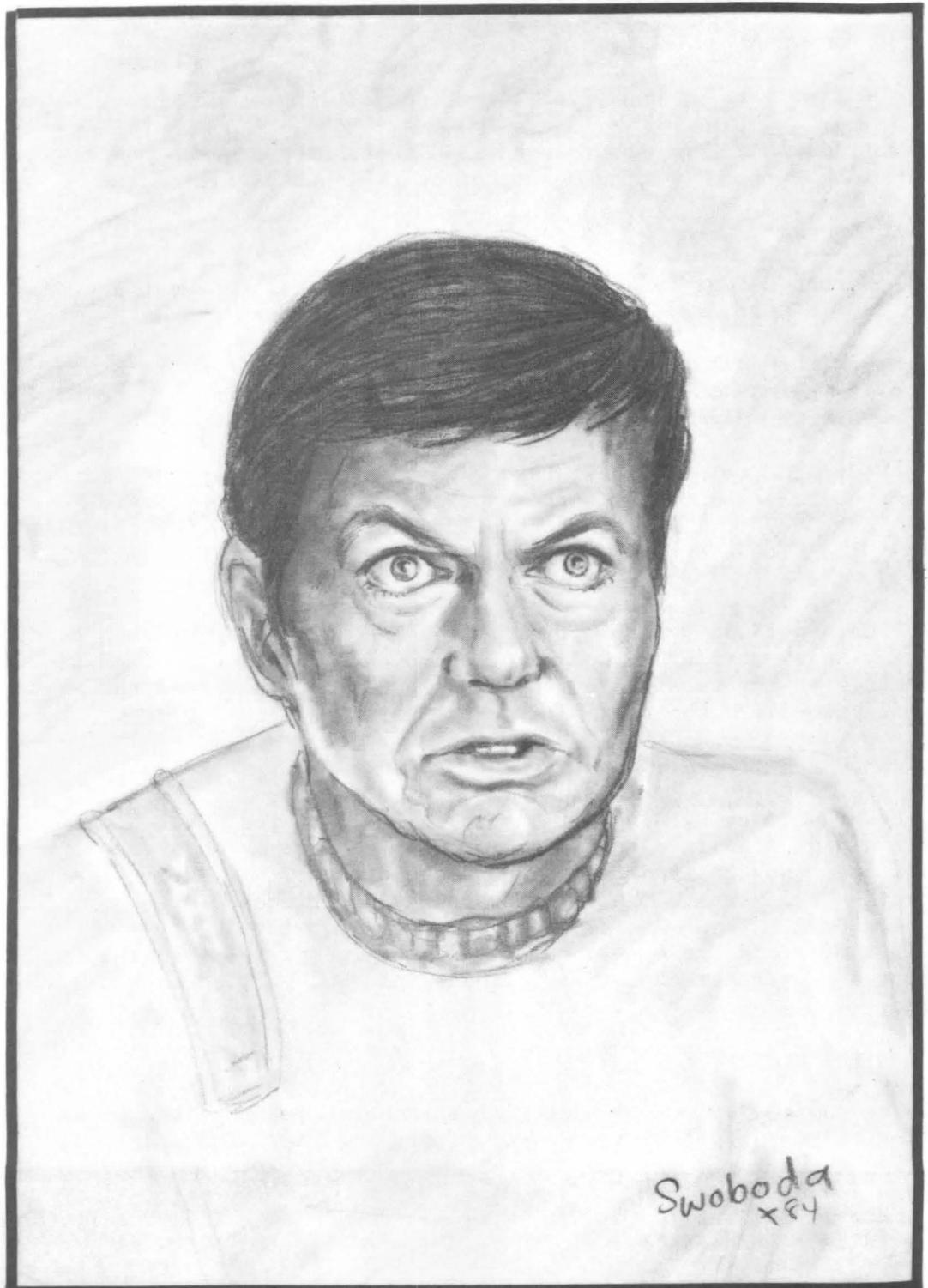
His office doors opened quietly and he looked up, thankful for the interruption. The greeting died on his lips, however, when he saw who had entered.

"Jim," he said flatly.

The admiral stood hesitantly in the door, clearly not expecting the cold greeting. Then he smiled and moved into the office. The doors closed silently behind him.

"Bones," he replied. "Mind if I sit down?" He did not wait for an answer as he made himself comfortable.

"What do you want?" McCoy asked, glad in a way that Kirk had sat down. He did not want him to see the mess on the floor behind the desk.



Swoboda
x84

Kirk's smile hovered uncertainly and finally disappeared completely. "I've been worried about you, Bones. I thought maybe, well, that maybe you'd like to talk."

"You don't want to hear what I have to say."

Kirk ignored the warning. "I'll admit I wasn't ready to talk about...things...last night, no. But we have to go on now." Kirk looked vulnerable for a moment, open and accessible to pain. "It's what Spock would want us to do."

"Spock! That's a fine thing to say, now isn't it, Jim?"

"What do you mean?"

"If it wasn't for the abysmal stupidity of the command on this vessel, I'd say that was the proper thing to say. But I'm not buying it. Not from you."

"Scotty mentioned you were upset, Bones, but...."

"But nothing!" McCoy exploded. He stood up and leaned over the desk, palms flat against the desk top. "Spock didn't have to die like that and you know it!"

"It was the only thing that could have saved us...."

"No, it wasn't. I'm not ignorant, Jim. I know procedures. We have specialty teams for dirty work like that. Even on training missions those teams are aboard. Why didn't you let them do their jobs?"

"Spock moved too fast...he probably figured he could do it...."

"Bullshit! The kamikaze team was suited up and ready to move in..I saw them down there in Engineering. They were prepared to go in and fix the problem like they were trained to do."

"Bones, I don't know what you --"

"Damn right. You're so caught up in your own personal pain and suffering that you can't give anyone else a chance to say what's on their mind. Well, you're gonna shut up and listen to me right now, Admiral, because you need to hear what I've got to say."

Kirk paled and sank a little lower in his chair.

The doctor sat down again and when he spoke, his voice was deathly calm.

"I heard what you and Spock were talking about down there. 'The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.' Sounded like a damned good excuse you gave him for justifying what he did."

"I gave him?" Kirk managed to sputter.

"That philosophy is downright frightening, Admiral. Sounds a little too much like the greatest assassins in the universe coined the phrase: Hitler, Ivan the Terrible, Attila the Hun...and Khan. It sure as hell wasn't Vulcan. Spock sure got an overdose of Human contamination over the years, didn't he? And once more, he pulled your ass out of the fire, didn't he? Isn't that what you're thinking?"

Kirk hesitated too long. McCoy's eyes narrowed ominously. "'I feel young again.'" He mimicked Kirk with surprising talent. "That sounds like someone feeling a little too proud of being hauled out of trouble. Sounds to me like you're thinkin' Spock died to save good old Admiral J.T. Kirk, don't you think?" McCoy leaned over and nearly spat his words out. "Excuse me, Admiral, but Spock did it for his students...his children. Not for you. But somehow you've gotten the impression it was all for the sake of the friendship you two have. Forget what I said earlier about stupidity. Let's call it what it is. There's a lot of selfishness going on around here."

Kirk opened his mouth to speak but didn't act fast enough.

"And as for that funeral scene....! How well do you think you complimented your good friend Spock by calling his soul the most human you had ever met up with? He is a Vulcan, for God's sake! You managed to compress him into something all us wasps could identify with and completely ignored the fact that his heritage is different - gloriously different. Or maybe you forgot that these past few years." McCoy stopped to catch his breath and tried to quiet the pounding of his heart.

"Was," Kirk said softly.

"What?"

"Spock was a Vulcan. Past tense."

"Whatever," McCoy said tersely, turning away from Kirk's eyes.

"You finished?"

"There's more, but I don't feel like discussin' it."

Kirk shook his head. "I can understand your concerns, Bones, really. You're right; it was a poor choice of words at the...at the funeral. I didn't realize it until you mentioned it. I apologize."

"Don't bother. I'm not the one you need to say that to. Try the apology on Saavik. You probably hurt her more than you did me. I don't bruise that easily."

"Oh?"

McCoy shot a cutting glance at Kirk, who promptly closed his mouth. There was a long silence before the admiral spoke again.

"Bones, I know all this has upset you a great deal. Scotty told me what happened earlier today."

'Great,' McCoy thought. 'It's probably all over the ship by now. To hell with them all.'

"I think maybe you're more angry at Spock than you are at me, though."

McCoy only glared at Kirk. "I mean, it would be natural. You couldn't stop Spock -- both you and I know that when he got something in his head, we couldn't change the way he felt. He was stubborn."

'One of his best faults,' McCoy thought, the anger losing a little of its momentum.

Why, thank you, Doctor.

McCoy sat up, his mouth falling open. Not again.

"Bones? You okay?" Kirk was leaning forward, his expression showing deep concern.

"Yeah," McCoy said slowly, forcing the unwelcome thoughts away. He refused to let Kirk know what was going on. 'You're afraid,' he told himself derisively. 'Afraid to let down your barriers, 'cause what else is lurkin' in the background?'

Only a deranged subconscious that appears to be goin' Vulcan.

"You don't look very well."

"I'm fine, Jim. Really. Just a little tired." McCoy rubbed the back of his neck. "I haven't had too much sleep." Things seemed to slip back into place slowly now, his anger disappearing. Could that be the answer? Was it that he was angry at Spock and taking it out on Jim? Possibly. "I'm sorry I blew like that," he said quietly, still not looking at Jim.

Kirk was on his feet and around the desk swiftly, one arm out towards McCoy...when he stopped short. McCoy glanced up, then followed Kirk's eyes to the floor, his heart sinking as he realized Kirk was aware of the tapes and papers down there.

Kirk bent over and picked up a handful of the slim cassettes, reading them carefully. He put them on the table carefully. "Oh, Bones," he breathed. "What the hell is going on here?"

McCoy looked at the small pile of evidence and knew that if things were bad before, they were rapidly getting worse. He couldn't think of a defense.

Move carefully, Doctor. Jim cannot suspect now. It is too soon.

There was another mental "click!" and the explanation flowed into him smoothly. Missing pieces fell into place like key items in a flawed geometry proof, and he knew what Spock had been trying to impress on him. Knew what Spock had done in those blinding seconds. Sudden cold detachment supplied an alibi for the tapes.

"Must have been somebody working here at my desk while I was gone earlier. A tech, maybe." He prayed that Kirk would not look further and see the authors of some of those scientific treatises...or see the languages they were written in. "Someone probably got curious about the Genesis Device, Jim, and did some research."

Kirk's face became thoughtful. "Sure, must have been." But McCoy saw the lingering doubt, saw the hazel eyes flick towards the floor quickly and look up at him again, this time with the certainty that something was wrong here, very wrong indeed.

Now, Doctor. I shall assist.

McCoy flung caution to the wind and put his hand on Kirk's arm and...pushed. "Really, Jim, it's nothing. I'm fine, believe me, just tired. Forget it." He felt something pass between his hand and Kirk's flesh and pushed again harder. Some barrier came up in his head as protection, but still a headache started up behind his eyes and he willfully ignored it, concentrating so hard that sweat started running down his back.

Enough.

McCoy pulled back, watching Kirk carefully. The admiral rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and shook his head a little. Then he looked down at McCoy and smiled easily, the familiar old smile.

"You're just tired," he said, the resonance in his voice sounding so much like Spock that for a moment McCoy was terrified that Kirk would hear it, too.

"That's right."

The last of the confusion drifted out of Kirk's eyes and he moved toward the door. "All right, then. I'm glad you're okay. I wouldn't want to lose you, too, Bones. You know that."

McCoy smiled, forcing himself to sound cheerful, normal. "I know, Jim. Thanks for your concern; I appreciate it."

Kirk was at the door now, moving so swiftly that McCoy had a sudden image of an invisible hand, pushing the admiral out the door impatiently. He smiled with the secret. He had to hold on a little longer, because they had a lot of work to do.

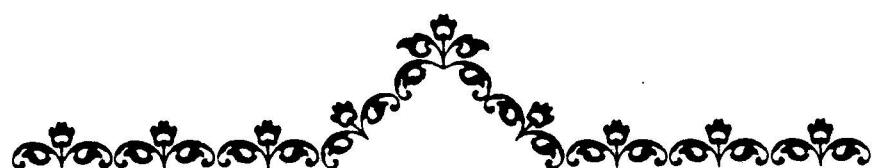
"Dinner later, Bones?" Kirk asked from the doorway.

McCoy nodded. "Sure, Jim. Just buzz me when you're ready."

"I will." The doors closed. For a moment, McCoy just sat, eyes shut, regretting that he couldn't tell Kirk what had happened. He did not want to examine too closely what was going on inside his mind, but there was comfort in the fact that he would understand everything soon.

McCoy reached to the floor and began picking up tapes. In minutes schematics and equations flowed across the screen and the doctor was lost in his search.

And when a nurse came in hours later with a question, some inner sense told him to shut off the computer terminal. Told him as a precaution, because everyone knew that only a Vulcan can read a page at a single glance.



"They used to say, if man could fly, he'd have wings. But he did fly; he discovered he had to. Do you wish that the first Apollo mission hadn't reached the moon, or that we hadn't gone on to Mars and then to the nearest star? That's like saying you wish that you still operated with scalpels and sewed your patients up with catgut, like your great, great, great-grandfather used to do ... Dr. McCoy is right in pointing out the enormous danger potential in any contact with life and intelligence as fantastically advanced as this. But I must point out that the possibilities - the potential for knowledge and advancement is equally great. Risk - risk is our business."

- Return to Tomorrow

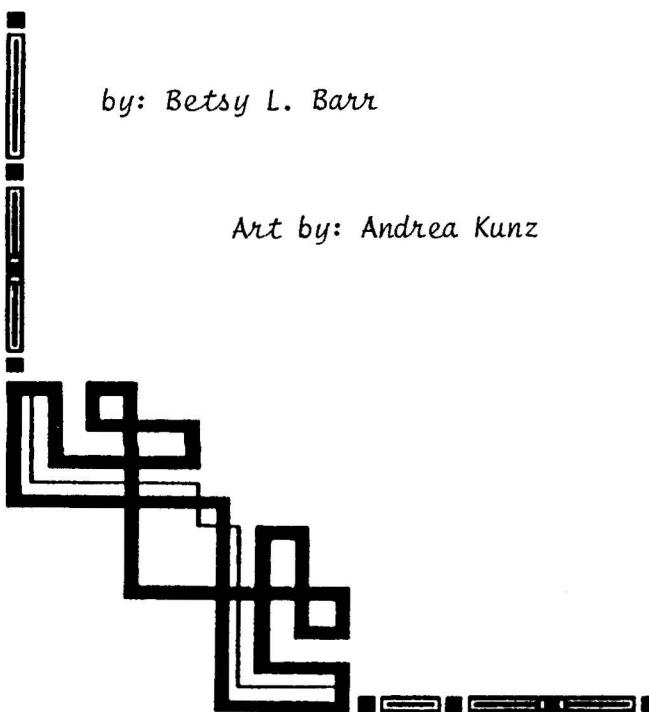
M I M
N E D L D

I envy you
the ability
to touch
another mind.
We are so limited;
our mind-blind race.
So alone,
as Kollos said,
within our separate bodies,
separate minds.
You touch my face
And we are one.
We know each other
past and present
intimately.
What must it be like
with Vulcan mates,
to feel the other's pleasure
as your own;
to know
just how to touch,
and where
to share
each other's fire.

by: Betsy L. Barr

Art by: Andrea Kunz

Speaking forever
together,
in silence -
never
to misunderstand
or have to wonder
what the other one
is thinking.
You said it was
deeply personal,
McCoy once told me;
and yet
you have opened your mind
to a madman,
an alien machine,
a silicon creature
and to me;
often
to me,
to save me,
to save my ship.
I envy you
your gift
to know all,
to see everything
and understand
with just a touch.
Thank you
for sharing it
with me.







FIELDS OF YESTERDAY

Across the fields of yesterday I hear your voice calling.
I turn and glimpse your face in the crowd.
A sad smile bids me follow as you walk away.
Through the surging tides of humanity
I struggle to close the distance between us,
But to no avail, for you are gone -

Lost to me forever!

Defeated I lean against the wall and close my eyes.
In the midst of life, my soul is dying.
Softly, gently, through the layers of sound I hear your words.
Come to me, find me, I, too, am alone.
With renewed hope I search the passing crowd
For the one face that can mend my soul.
But you are gone -

Lost to me once more!

I lie in the dark, fighting for control
As warm tears run down my cheeks.
Was it only a dream? Perhaps.
But my heart believes!

Spock lives - and I will find him!

Terri Sylvester

border: Caro Hedge

Art: Caren Parnes

THE WARNING

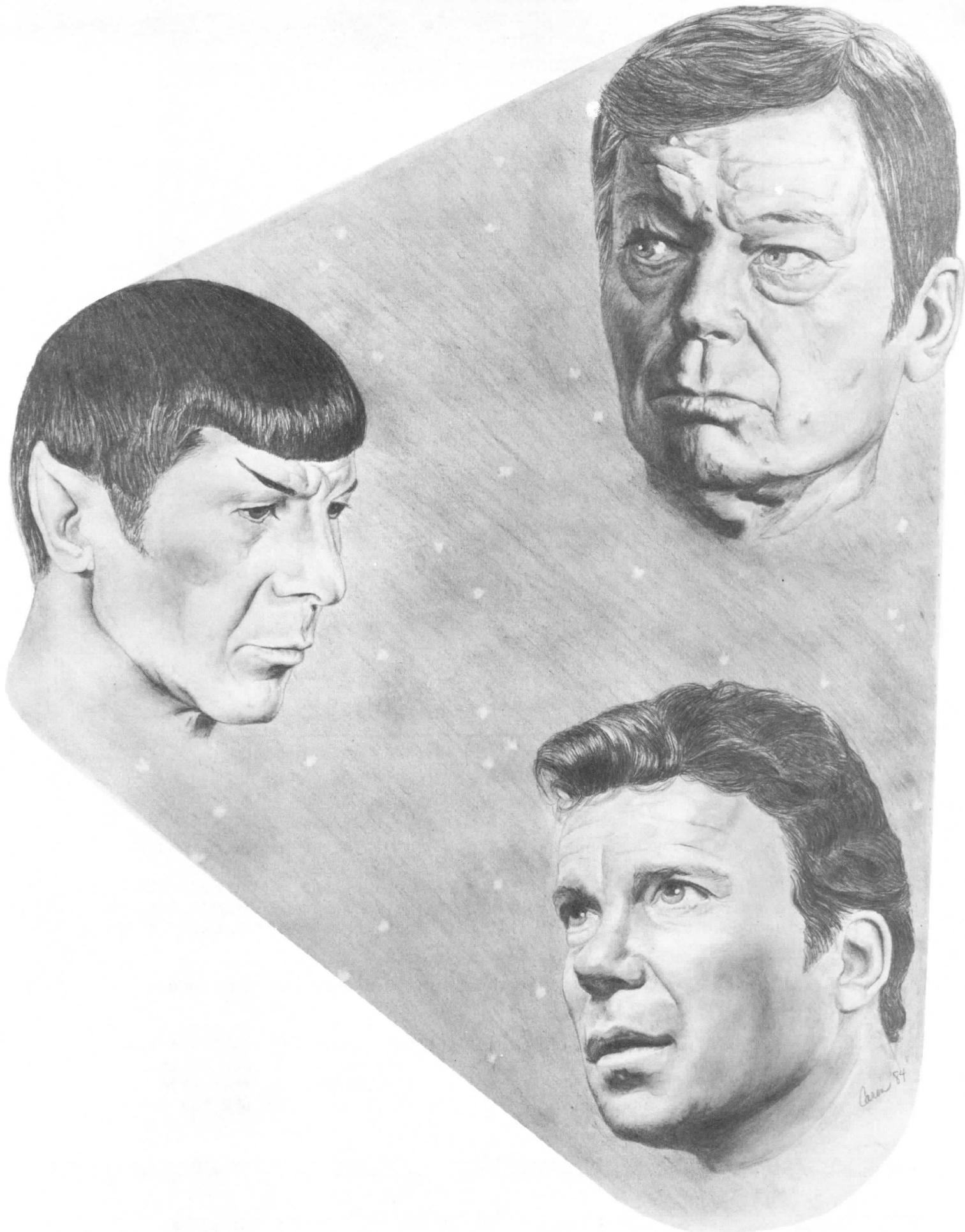
by: Ginna LaCroix

Art by: Caren Parnes

You're going down,
Just as I knew you would.
There is nothing to do here but wait,
And that is not your nature.
Had I not given over command
I could have stopped you.
No,
I might as easily stop an ion storm.
Saavik's quoting regulations again
Where I cannot force words past
A suddenly closed throat.
I would beg you to take me, not her,
But know it is useless,
One of us has to stay with the ship.
Once more fate seeks a final parting,
And all I can give you is a cautious
warning,
"Jim, be careful."

"Jim, be careful."
How often you've said
Words to that effect,
Each time giving yourself away.
But this is different,
This time you ignore the danger
That faces all of us
And focus solely on him.
Up to now I've kept silent,
Knowing what you stand to lose.
But you are the captain, Spock,
And your concern must be for everyone.
You have to face the possibility
That he won't come back,
Perhaps none of us will.
Momentary anger flashes through me
As the words tumble out,
Although my warning carries the joking tone
I normally use when baiting you,
This time we both know
There is no humor in the words,
"We will!"

"Jim, be careful."
Does he know how clearly the worry
Shows in his eyes?
We've faced danger before,
But not recently,
And never like this.
I want you with me, Spock,
But we both know
The needs of the many
Outweigh the needs of the few.
I know the protest is there
But, except for the warning in your words,
You've left it unsaid.
I have to go,
If she's down there,
He might be,
And I can't let Khan get them.
So, once more, all I have time to give
you
Is a brief smile of
Thanks,
Gratitude,
Farewell?



THE BEQUEST

Suzanne Fine

Art by: Mary Mills

Leonard McCoy was unusually edgy - but then, he had good reason.

Pollux 4, one of the more recent members of the United Federation of Planets, had requested that a diplomatic mediator be brought from the outside to help settle the civil strife that threatened the peace of the inhabitants.

They also requested the presence of the Enterprise, and more specifically, Doctor Leonard McCoy.

Pollux 4 was inhabited by two nations - both arriving as colonizers almost nine years earlier - within six months of each other, and both laying claim to political and cultural control. Neither side had wished to attempt any sort of compromise until now. The UFP had wasted no time in complying.

One of the colonies, settled by Therans from the Deneba Tau system, maintained that they had been the first to arrive on the planet. In view of this, they had claimed the planet for Thera.

The other race, boasting that they had travelled countless centuries toward their destination long before the Therans even knew of the planet's existence, contended that they were the rightful heirs to the world.

These were the Yonadans.

When the order had come from Starfleet, McCoy had felt a wave of excitement race through him that made him feel like a kid again. There was also a nagging sense of guilt that tickled the back of his mind for not having been there when the Yonadans had reached their long-awaited goal. Fate had intervened when the Enterprise was called to defend a cargo of much prized dilithium crystals against a Romulan Bird-of-Prey. The Enterprise had never returned to the Pollux system - until now.

Stepping off the turbo-lift onto the bridge, he adopted the demeanor of the confident Medical Officer. At least that was his intention.

"You look nervous, Bones. Lighten up."

McCoy gave the Captain a cynical glance, rocked back on his heels, with hands clasped behind his back, and stared forward at nothing in particular. Not quite nervous, Jim, he thought to himself. More on the order of terrified. He smiled inwardly at the private joke, and hoped that he was not as transparent to the rest of the crew.

"Captain, we are now within sensor range of Pollux 4."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. Commander Uhura, open a channel to the Yonadans and put it on the viewer. Standard orbit, Mr. Sulu." He pressed a control on the arm of his chair. "Ambassador Cassel please report to the bridge." He turned to his First Officer. "Well, Spock, what do you think?"

"The Yonadans have indeed progressed at an amazing rate," Spock said as he took his eyes from his scanner. "In eight years they have built cities, transportation systems, and have achieved a superior level of technology and agriculture."

"The Fabrini archives were quite extensive," offered the Doctor. "And remember, the Yonadans themselves are an extraordinarily bright and intelligent race."

"I have the Yonadan Confidante on visual." said Uhura.

The viewer wavered into the image of an elderly humanoid dressed in a regal flowing green robe, flanked on either side by two attendants wearing the traditional plaid that indicated their status. To the Doctor's dismay, Priestess Natira was absent.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk, of the United Starship Enterprise. We greet you, sir."

The older man bowed in acknowledgement. "Of course, Captain; I remember you well. I am Morlis, Confidante to the Priestess. On behalf of the people of Yonada, I bid you welcome."

As Kirk turned to exchange a knowing grin with his Chief Medical Officer, he noted that the Federation diplomat was stepping off the turbolift. "Thank you sir. And on behalf of the United Federation, I offer best wishes in the sincere hope that peace between Thera and Yonada may soon be attained. I am sure you will find Ambassador Cassel to be an extremely effective mediator.

Joshua Cassel nodded formally, "I am most anxious to serve you in your negotiations, Confidante Morlis. If it is convenient, I shall beam down directly."

"That would be most satisfactory, Ambassador. And Captain Kirk, you will of course include Dr. McCoy in your landing group. There is someone here...of...interest to him."

The good doctor colored slightly. "I'll be there." he said. *With bells on*, he thought.



Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Cassel gathered on the transporter platform. Kirk was giving Commander Scott some last minute details. "It will probably be a while before we return to the ship, Scotty. The Yonadans are big on amenities...also, assign a two-person security team to accompany the Ambassador when the summit meetings get underway. Hand phasers only; we don't want to offend anyone, but it's liable to get a little hairy. Energize."

"Aye, sir. And good luck." The engineer's remark was meant for the entire landing party, but his eyes settled on Doctor McCoy. Gradually, their patterns

glimmered out.

The four figures materialized in the immense cavern of a rather official looking hall. Confidante Morlis met them. "Ah, gentlemen!" the old man's face split into a wide grin. "Please, this way. We will refresh ourselves with some wine." They were led into another room, much smaller and decorated profusely with the Fabrini hieroglyphics that were characteristic of the culture.

"Ambassador Cassel," Morlis went on, "I cannot tell you how welcome a sight you are. The Theran Governor has been most obliging, but there are those who would see him dead. There are many young, zealous rebels who would oust him, and destroy us completely. Even among our own people there are those who would launch a violent war."

"We shall do what we can to accommodate both sides, sir. May I have a look at the lists of grievances?"

"Of course. I have had them placed in your chambers, so that you may study them undisturbed.." Morlis motioned to a nearby aide who escorted Cassel out.

"Confidante Morlis," said Spock in his customary dignified manner. "Would it be possible for me to inspect your city and the progress you have made since your arrival here? I should find such a study most enlightening."

"Certainly, Mr. Spock. You may wander freely at your convenience. Perhaps you would care to start after you have dined with us. You will dine with us, won't you?" It was more of a statement than a request.

"We would be honored, Confidante." said the Captain, placing his cup on a small table in front of him.

Finally, McCoy spoke up. "Confidante, my wife...that is, Natira...may I see her?" He was not sure how the term, "wife" would be taken. Even though the marriage had been nullified by the removal of the Instrument of Obedience, he still felt as though he were joined to her.

For the first time since they had met the Confidante, they saw his face take on a sombre expression. "Please. Come with me."

There was something wrong, thought McCoy. Doesn't she want to see me? God, does she hate me for deserting her?

The three officers spoke not a word as they followed the older gentleman down a long corridor. Shortly, they came to another hall.

It did not take McCoy long to deduce that this was a burial vault. His lovely Natira was dead.

His beautiful wife, who had made him feel more alive when he himself was dying, lay cold and alone in a crypt below his feet.

"I am sorry to have informed you in this manner. I knew no other way. Please forgive my deceit." The old man hung his head.

Jim Kirk placed a caring hand on his friend's shoulder. *Life can be so damned unfair.*

"How long..." It was barely a whisper.

"Four months now."

"What was it...that she died from?"

"It was a tragic thing. There was a transport accident. One of the interconnecting tunnels under the city became weakened after a tremor occurred - they are quite common here - and a large section collapsed, killing many of our people. When help finally reached her, it was too late to reverse the damage." The Confidante turned to leave the broken man to grieve in solitude. He beckoned Kirk and Spock to follow.

Outside the room, the three men waited in silence. "A most unfortunate incident," Spock said finally. "The Doctor will suffer, emotionally, for some time."

James Kirk nodded. Turning to Morlis, he said, "This was the reason you requested the Enterprise."

"That is partially true, Captain."

Before he could continue, the door behind them opened and a shaken but dry-eyed Dr. McCoy emerged. He did not look at any of them. The Confidante spoke. "There is one more thing that I must show you, if you are able," he said sympathetically.

McCoy nodded weakly. For the moment, at least, he felt more numb than grief-stricken.

They entered a court-yard outside the building as Morlis continued. "As I was saying to you before, Captain, to deliver this distressing news was only part of the reason we summoned you." He dropped and sat on a stone bench that faced an outdoor

gymnasium where several children were busy participating in athletic instructions. "The other was to beg you to take our new Priestess with you until the civil turmoil subsides. As you know, our Priestess is more of a ruler than spiritual advisor. Her death would send chaos throughout the people at this time, whereas in her absence, her duties could be performed by a proxy."

Kirk and Spock exchanged wary glances. "Sir," said Spock gently, "As you may well know, the Federation prohibits interference of this nature. It is not policy to offer political asylum in cases such as this."

The old man continued to gaze past them at the field. "It is the policy of the Federation, then, to keep children from their rightful parents. It was the will of our beloved Natira that her child be reunited with her natural father."

He turned slowly to McCoy. "Do you not agree?"

Today was a day for shocks. A child! He was dumbfounded in disbelief. Finally he found the words. He looked nervously at the children in the yard, studying each one for some small clue. "Which one?" his voice shook.

Morlis stood up. "Calandra!" he called. Presently, one of the group turned and started bounding towards them.

She was a graceful little thing, indeed. As she came nearer, McCoy could see that she had the same elfin features that belonged to her mother, even though her short-cropped hair was more of a sandy shade. Then he noticed the piercing blue eyes

that were his own. "Yes, Confidante?" she asked breathlessly, eyeing the three strangers. She held herself with a stature worthy of her title.

"These are the men of the Enterprise, child. And this is Doctor Leonard McCoy."

The brilliant sapphires became lumps of blue ice. "The husband of my mother," she bowed. "So you are the man who caused her to cry into her pillow at night, when she closed her eyes and felt the aloneness." The words were cool and flat, yet they struck out like an angry slap.

"Priestess," said the Confidante, "We shall speak later. You may go now."

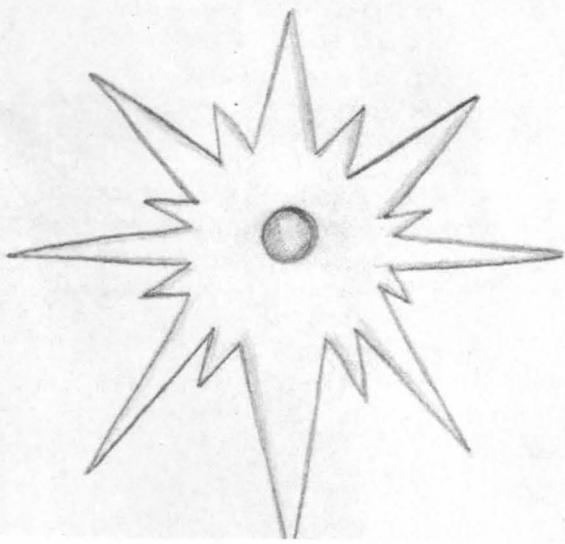
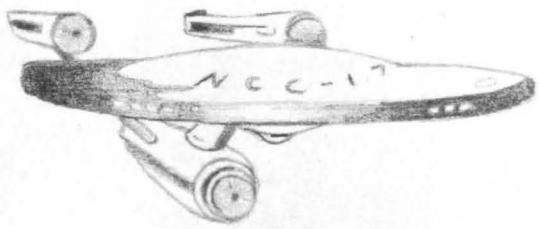
The eyes regarded McCoy with contempt, as she turned away and walked in the opposite direction.



CAPTAIN'S LOG--Supplemental:

Ambassador Cassel has informed me that peace negotiations will begin on the following day in the Great Hall of Yonada. I am assured by him that a workable system will be accepted by both parties. If all goes as expected, the Enterprise will leave Pollux 4 within 72 hours.

I am also concerned with the matter of my Ship's Surgeon, who has suddenly acquired a daughter, the product of a brief marriage encounter with the Yonadan Priestess Natira, now deceased. The Yonadans have, in effect, dumped the child into our laps for safekeeping. Morally, we have no choice but to comply; however, I cannot help but wonder if anyone has taken into consideration the



MM '84

feelings and wishes of both Dr. McCoy and his progeny.



The men of the Enterprise had returned to the ship in order to don proper attire for the dinner that would be given in their honor. When the transporter reassembled their molecules, the three officers went in silence to their respective quarters. The events of the day had warranted such.

Once in his own cabin, Dr. McCoy fell heavily on his bed and lay motionless for what seemed a long time. Placing a weary arm across his eyes, he tried to blot out all conscious thought, but the facts confronting him kept flailing about, trying to find a sane reason for existence - a comfortable niche in which to settle.

Four months! Had he come just one-hundred twenty days sooner, he might have been able to...to what? If the Fabrini medicine could not save her, what could he have done? And eight years with a child, waiting and hoping, gazing up at the sky at night, wondering if he were even still alive. He had already left one daughter in the care of her mother and run off to the stars. That action had made him a man with an empty place in his heart. Fate has a way of catching up with you - with a vengeance.

McCoy hauled himself up to sit on the side of the bed. Well Len, you've got yourself one hell of a predicament. You can sit around swallowing large doses of remorse and feeling sorry for yourself, or you can take the bull by the horns and meet this thing head on. You've got to face the

responsibility of parenthood for a change, even if this kid would like nothing better than to spit in your eye. This is your second chance, McCoy, and that's a hell of a lot more than most men get.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone at the door. "Come in." He said hoarsely.

James Kirk entered carrying a large flask and two glasses. "Thought you could use one of these," he said.

McCoy stood up, rubbing the back of his neck absently, and moved toward his desk. "Actually, I could use about three of those, but I guess one will do."

Kirk smiled and began to pour two shots of the amber fluid.

"Jim, I just don't understand what could have happened."

"Well, Bones, if you don't...I mean, being a doctor and all..." He grinned impishly.

"That's not what I meant," he replied, a little snappishly. "I was talking about the fact that Natira never once tried to contact me about it all these years, yet Morlis insists that she still loved me and considered herself espoused. It just doesn't make sense."

Kirk sipped his brandy. "It might not have been all that unusual, from what Spock has told me about Yonadan customs. Natira may have felt that by informing you of the existence of an offspring, she was holding something over your head and depriving you of your freedom. Your mission in life was just as important as was her own. The fact that she felt secure in

the knowledge that you loved her made it easier to live with your memory until the time when you would come back to her."

"I don't know," said McCoy, sighing heavily. "It all sounds pretty cockamamy to me."

"Spock doesn't seem to think so."

"Spock hasn't just acquired a child that hates his guts."

Kirk looked at him compassionately. "I don't think she hates you, Bones. I think she's just hurt and confused, and probably misses her mother. Give it some time; things will start to fall into place. Hey, you'd better get cleaned up and changed. They'll be expecting us on the planet surface, and it wouldn't make very good public relations for either of us to show up drunk." He slapped his old friend on the back and left for his own cabin.



The young Priestess-Apparent fiddled thoughtfully with a geometric bauble that she was trying to balance onto the edge of a vertical plank. From behind, a tall, slim dark-haired woman entered quietly, regarding the child cautiously. Finally she spoke. "So he has come. I was not sure that he would."

"And I was always sure that he would not. It is not right! How can the elders just hand me over to a total stranger, as though I were nobody!" She allowed the plaything to drop to the floor with a loud clatter.

The woman stepped closer. "It is for the best."

"It is for nothing!" She spun around vehemently. "Do they think I can simply turn by back on our people and go off to the stars with that...that outsider?" Control was coming hard. "I am Priestess! The people need me now more than ever!"

"The people need you safe. And it was your mother's will."

"Then why was my mother's 'will' not honored upon her death?"

The woman fell silent, eyes averted. After a moment, she met the Priestess' challenge. "I will not split hairs with you. You will go with your father, learn his ways, and tolerate his race and customs. Perhaps you will even grow fond of him. And when our world is at peace, and you have learned other mores, and wisdom is yours, then you will return to us, and then you will finally drink from the Stone Cup."

"Oh, Ailya!" The child ran into the arms of the older woman and buried her face in her robe. "I shall miss you Ailya. You have been more than guardian and teacher to me."

"And I shall miss you too, little one. But we will be together again. You wait and see. The time will be short!" The two exchanged smiles. "Come, we will decide what you will take on your journey. Perhaps by the evening meal, your petulence will be gone!" she chided.



Mercifully, the conversation of the evening was for the most part centered around the upcoming arbitration. "I don't understand, Confidante," said Cassel, cutting into a large piece of fruit. The terms appear to be so simple. Just why do you need a go-between at all?"

"Legalities, Mr. Cassel." replied Morlis. "Our affairs go deeper than you suspect. These concessions are the product of only a small representation of each society: the absolute Governor of the Theran colonies and a handful of the Acolyte of Yonada."

One of the Acolyte, of whom a sizable sample was present, spoke. "Our people are a tolerant race gentlemen, and we are known for that trait. But the Therans on the other hand, are somewhat aggressive by nature, and can be most stubborn in their demands. The Designated Lands Agreement, for instance, awards huge expanses of territories to the Therans - lands that have been occupied by Yonadans from the beginning."

The explanation was picked up by Caridor, the First Acolyte. "Many of our citizens will have to uproot their very lives and leave everything they have worked for to move on. Even with an official sanction, there will be much unrest and bitter feelings. We are an endurant species but we are not sheep."

The room sounded with murmers of agreement.

Mr. Spock was digesting what had been said. "I am sure that the Therans hold many similar grievances." he stated in an attempt to equalize the situation.

Kirk replaced the glass he

had been turning in his hands contemplatively. "But why bring in an outside mediator? Wouldn't the two nations do just as well settling things on their own?"

"The action is basically a matter of saving face," answered Morlis. "Since neither side would dream of appearing submissive in the eyes of the other, the presence of the Ambassador services to place the responsibility of initiator on his shoulders. Also the Yonadans and Therans hold one common characteristic -- a sense of awe for the grandiloquent. Bringing in the Federation is viewed on both parts as an official act of total earnest."

"In other words," interjected Dr. McCoy, "If you can't baffle 'em with bureaucracy, dazzle 'em with..."

"Bones," the Captain warned, interrupting the somewhat colorful quote.

The Priestess had taken her meal in silence up to now. She stood up graciously and excused herself from the company of the adults. "You will forgive me, gentlemen. I must take my leave, as there are things that I must attend to to prepare for my..." she almost said, "exile", but thought the better of it and said, "...my departure."

Heading for the door, she heard the Confidante say to her, "But first, you will of course, Priestess, escort your father on a tour of our Great Hall. It is time that you became better acquainted."

She turned obediently, but inside she was seething. The

Confidante had a knack for making a request sound like an order. "Yes, of course. It will be as you wish." Only the Yonadans in the room realized the full portent of defiance in her reply.

The Great Hall proved to be an immense complex, honeycombed with myriad divisions and subdivisions. It was comprised mostly of various archives and copious libraries, administrative units, spiritual shrines and living quarters for hundreds of people.

The Priestess led McCoy to an observatory in the uppermost section of the citadel. "If you look into this viewer, you will be able to see Yonada, which orbits our world. It is the vessel that brought us here." She adjusted the magnification and triangulated the position of the now-deserted asteroid-ship. "It's design goes far into antiquity. No one knew it's true nature until the Book of the People revealed it to us."

McCoy nodded. Certainly, no one had to repeat that story to him.

The two gazed thoughtfully into the viewscreen. The child continued, transfixed, her countenance softening slightly. "It circles our Planet now, a monument to what we were - a new star floating in the night sky. This is the New Fabrina. We have fulfilled the destiny laid out by the Wise Ones. Now we must learn all that was kept from us during the millenium. We must cast off the old flesh, just as we cast away the Instrument of Obedience as a sign of our self-dependence. We will be a new race - a people transformed.

"When I was born, the first

in the new world, my mother presented me to the people and announced, 'this is the New and Shining Sun'. That is what my name means..."

"Calandra," the Doctor said gently.

The sound of his voice brought her rudely back to the present. Annoyed by his use of her proper name, she gathered her dignity. "Yes, Doctor? A question?"

The distant eyes regarded McCoy with calculated aloofness. *Damn it, McCoy, since when are you intimidated by an eight-year old?* Granted, this one's got an intellect far surpassing your typical garden variety, but still a child. *Oh, the devil with it, he thought, tomorrow's another day.* "It's getting late. I suppose we'd better be getting back." he finally said.

"Yes, of course." she answered, averting her eyes. "Tomorrow, at dawn, I forfeit the Priesthood. I have to get ready." She turned quickly and led the way out of the observatory.



Sunrise on Pollux 4 brought spectators from every province to fill the Great Hall. Every corner was occupied by those who came early enough to procure a place.

The Officers of the Enterprise had graciously accepted the invitation to observe the ceremony, although Ambassador Cassel made his apologies to the Confidante in order to prepare for the arrival of Governor Losyrd and the peace talks that would take place immediately following.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy were led to an alcove near a central clearing where the ritual would take place. As they glanced around their surroundings, a tall, lithe woman joined them and bowed respectfully. "I am Ailya, personal Guardian of the Priestess Calandra. I have been appointed by the Confidante to explain our traditions to you." Her smile was warm. "Will you please follow me? You must attire yourselves in the proper accouterments, lest you dishonor our ways."

She ushered them into a small vestibule off to the side of the main Hall and chose three blue-black togas from a cabinet. "Put these on," she instructed them. "I will return shortly to escort you to your proper places." Ailya bowed again, then left the room.

"I have researched this affair thoroughly," said Spock, slipping the garment over his head, "and have found it most fascinating. It would seem that the Rite of Delegation, as it is called, was incorporated by the Fabrini fifteen thousand years ago, but there remains no record of it ever having been put to use until now."

"It's no wonder they've got a packed house out there," Kirk observed. "But then, they've never had a Priest-Ruler in jeopardy before, thanks to the Instrument of Obedience and their former state of total isolation from the rest of the galaxy."

"Well, now they've got to think for themselves," added the Doctor.

"The law encompasses other situations as well," continued Spock. "The legacy of the

Priesthood passes from father-to-son, or mother-to-daughter, as the case may be. Should the elder die, the younger assumes his place. However, should the Priest leave no heir, then the power automatically passes to the First Acolyte and his descendants.

"Should the Priest become incapable of performing his duties, due to illness or insanity or a similar circumstance, this ceremony empowers the First Acolyte to act in the name of the Priest-Ruler. He then enjoys absolute authority, but nonetheless by proxy only. This particular relationship might span as many as three generations, after which, if the Sovereign or his heir has not resumed his proper station, the descendants of the First Acolyte become the inheritors."

"An interesting arrangement, but why doesn't the Confidante act in the name of the Priestess, since he is the official spokesman, anyway?" The Captain queried, fastening the belt around his waist.

"As the Confidante is not a member of the Acolyte, he may not, legally, ascend that station. He remains an advisor only."

"Well," remarked the Doctor, "however it's done, we'd better get out there, or we'll miss the whole show."

At the appropriate time, the seven members of the Minor Towers entered formally from the side wings of the main tabernacle. The group was comprised of four men and three women, each wearing pale gold robes tied at the waist with sashes in various colors, denoting the rank and place of each. They

formed a semi-circle and knelt as the young ruler was escorted onto the main dais by the Confidante and two aides. A hush fell over the crowd.

Calandra approached the people and, spreading her hands cross-wise before her, uttered a phase that was inaudible to the spectators in the alcove. All hands became inclined.

"She blesses the people," whispered Ailya. "Now she will ask the Confidante to guide her this day in what she is about to undertake."

Calandra turned to Morlis with her impoloration. The Confidante placed one hand on her face, raised his eyes skyward, then turned to summon an assistant who was waiting nearby with a small tray. Caridor moved forward and knelt before the Priestess as the older man picked up a tattered book and began to read from it.

"The Confidante now asks the First of the Seven, under pain of death, if he will accept the responsibilities of the Priesthood, and to uphold the law of the Wise Ones," explained the woman. "The First Acolyte agrees to this, and swears to use his power wisely, for the sole benefit of the people, and vows to return the authority to the rightful legatee when the time is appropriate. He also attests that he will permit himself the luxury of a single heir during this period."

"Why only one?" inquired the Captain.

"The Priest-Ruler is permitted only one child in order to eliminate disputes concerning the transfer of authority from

parent to offspring. The First Acolyte must follow the principal accordingly, in the event that he might assume the Power."

"But what happens in the case of multiple births, such as twins?"

"The phenomena of twinning, Jim, common among terrans, is virtually non-existent among the Fabrini," McCoy interjected. "Their hormonal structure and physiology eliminates that problem. In the rare cases where both foetus were brought to full term, only one baby consistently survived."

The events taking place before them continued. Caridor, having accepted the terms indicated, bowed low enough that his head actually touched the floor, then straightened up again though still on his knees, and closed his eyes in pious meditation. There was a fleeting hint of regret on the face of the Priestess as she lifted from the proffered tray a rather unimpressive looking and diminutive bowl.

Ailya explained. "The Stone Cup of Yonada is the holiest of relics to us. It was said to have been brought to us from the Wise Ones, and its origin is shrouded in antiquity. Even the mineral that it was hewn from is unknown to us."

She paused as the figures on the platform commenced. As Calandra held the Cup austere, the Confidante poured a small amount of wine into it. Then the child offered it to Caridor, who accepted it.

"He may not drink from the Cup, as that is not his right;

only the Priests may do so. But he receives it as a sign of the trust which is consigned him."

A din of approval rose from the crowd as the new Priest-Regent presented the revered artifact for their inspection. Presently, he replaced the object back onto its tray, and picked up a bright-gold medallion, perhaps only a centimeter in diameter, that hung from a thin chain. This he placed around the child's neck, addressing her solemnly.

"Calandra, true Priestess of the Fabrini, accept this symbol of your incumbancy. We await your return."

Shouts of praise and support rose from every part of the Great Hall. As the noise diminished, Calandra bowed formally, and quite unceremoniously, in silence, left the dais, followed by the newly ordained Caridor, Morlis, and the remaining six Acolyte. It had been a simple, swift affair. Soon the people started to mill out slowly as well, and Ailya indicated that the three should return to the dressing room. Before leaving them, she spoke, "The Priestess is released from her obligations. Now it is your turn to fulfill yours." As she disappeared around a corner, Dr. McCoy could not help wondering if she was referring to the Federation or to himself.



Back in her suite, the former Priestess of Yonada prepared to leave the only world she had known to go away with a man she did not particularly wish to acquaint herself with. Accepting one's lot was a precept of her people, but nevertheless, she did not relish it. Still, she would endeavor to

make the best of the situation, and attempt to turn her exile into a cultural experience.

Choosing what to take or leave turned out to be a somewhat complex matter. Should only the necessities be packed, or was it wise to bring along a few sentimental items in spite of the fact that they might only serve to make her unduly homesick? Or was the opposite true, where the absence of such might initiate the same feelings when she longed for a remnant of her world on dark, silent nights? Should technical studies and mechanical pursuits to be included, and what of the many books she cherished so much?

Sifting through the various collections of junk and treasures that children throughout the galaxy inevitably acquire through the years, she came across a holographic crystal containing the image of her dead mother, recorded therein during happier times. Hesitantly, she activated it, watching the likeness compose itself. She stared at it, engrossed momentarily, when a voice broke the spell.

"She would be pleased by the events of the day," said Ailya.

"She is not here." returned Calandara flatly.

"Will you come with me to the memorial before you go?"

Calandra reflected upon this. She had not been to that place since the funeral, and even then she had feared she would defile her mother's memory with an emotional outburst. She had refused to cry that day, that black and shameful day, as she had watched her mother slip agonizingly away from her. The

pain of that time was buried deep in the floor of the memorial, and she had no wish to dig it up again.

"I cannot. There isn't time for sentimental transactions. There are preparations to be made."

"There will be time enough for preparations. Just as there will be time to heal the wounds, and find the answers." Ailya turned to go, then paused, and added, "Perhaps too, there will be time for tears."



Spock replaced the ritualistic garment back in its proper place. "I assume, Captain, that the events of the morning will place no significant strain on the issues involved in the upcoming meeting."

"No. The Theran delegates are well aware of the change of hands. Let's hope, though, that the council follows suit and keeps the whole affair short and sweet. Spock, let's go find ourselves a ring-side seat. Bones, I believe you have a date with a certain young lady - better not keep her waiting."

Ambassador Cassel met them in the spacious meeting room which had been prepared for the long-awaited reception. Governor Losyrd and his attendants were seated at a long table on one end, and Yonadan counterparts on the other. Nearby stood the military representations of each, and the security team from the Enterprise.

Preliminary preparations dispensed with, the various dignitaries extended felicitations

to one another. Ambassador Cassel commenced to read the endless lists and sublists of grievances, suggestions and recommendations to be argued about and voted upon in the next two days. Kirk sank back into his plushly upholstered chair. Any invocation he might have made concerning brevity would have to be pushed back into that place where dreams escape to ...



"Doctor, if you canna keep that bairne of your out of my Machine Shop, I'll...I'll..." stammering for the right words, Mr. Scott concluded lividly, "Well, I'll no' be runnin' a nursery down there!"

"Alright, Mr. Scott, I'll straighten it out." The Doctor sighed, exasperated. They had beamed aboard just two days ago, and already there was trouble, with three months to go until they reached Starbase One. Oh, his ambitious young offspring was thrilled enough with the prospect of being enrolled in the Institute he had chosen for her. *She's more Spock's type*, he thought wryly, and considered the possibility that she might be anxious to be rid of him as well.

Scott continued. "It's no' that I mind children, you know. And I certainly don't object to such a wee shaver holdin' that sort of delight in technical details. But she's disassembled two tricorders and a translator, and modified the whole mess into some sort of mechanical beastie, and tied it into the library console! How she overrode the primary programming I couldn't begin to tell you, but now I've got engineering records printing out in some kind of hieroglyphic



gobbledygook. And believe me, that blockheaded Ensign who was supposed to be in charge down there won't be turning his back on a mouse for even a second when I'm through with him! He'll be scrubbin' out sump tanks for a month..."

"Okay, Scotty, don't get yourself excited. I told you I'd take care of it, and you'll have you parts back within the hour."

Satisfied with that, the flustered Scotsman nodded stiffly and left.

You're getting too old for this foolishness, McCoy told himself as he headed for the lab. He was beginning to get enthusiastic about the Institute idea himself. If she didn't blow the whole damn place up once she got there, he mused darkly.

He found Calandra in the zoological lab with Doctor Christine Chapel. Maternal instincts had taken over in the efficient Doctor who took a liking to the girl. Christine had even made it a point to assume the duties of feeding the creatures housed there, even though that task was normally relegated to fledgling technicians of lower seniority, in order that Calandra could assist her.

The wide-eyed child observed a small animal, now dead, but whose remains had been preserved and placed in a transparent case. "What is this called?"

"That's a tribble."

"Don't you have any live ones? It's cute."

"No, I'm afraid we don't." she answered, laughing inwardly at the private joke.

"Christine, would you mind entering those medical reports I left with you this morning?" McCoy stood leaning against the door frame, arms crossed over his chest. She was about to say something, but then he added, "Now, Dr. Chapel, if you please." That subtle tone was well understood by all who worked with the good doctor. In essence it meant, "beat it".

Calandra spoke before he could say another word. "It's about my make-shift translator, isn't it?"

"You can't just remove equipment from the Small Parts Ship. They have to be accounted for. What the devil did you do, anyway? Mr. Scott's ready to have all our heads!" he tried to sound stern.

"But the library translator doesn't work very well. The idioms are all backwards, and it's hard to read.. My device just makes it easier to understand until I learn your language better. I...I did not know there would be a feedback.

Oh God, he thought, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "I don't suppose it had ever occurred to you to ask if we might have a device for such a purpose, now did it?" he asked sarcastically.

It hadn't.

"I suggest you return your ill-gotten gain to Mr. Scott before he strings a certain young Ensign up by his thumbs, and you along with him!" He employed his most authoritative glare, and turning to leave, called over his shoulder, "And remove that blasted programming! "...Damn

machines...tamperproof, huh?
Poppycock!" he muttered,
disappearing around a bend.



CAPTAIN'S LOG -- Stardate 6598.03

Following much debate, I am happy to report that the Therans and Yonadans have hit upon a comfortable medium. Governor Losyrd and his staff are on their way back to the Theron colony, and the Yonadan leaders are quite satisfied with the outcome.

The Priestess Calandra has requested permission to return to the planet's surface to retrieve some overlooked items before we leave orbit. Dr. McCoy will also accompany her so that he may obtain additional data concerning the Fabrini medical knowledge that has become legend. Mr. Cassel will be beaming back aboard to prepare his report, but Mr. Spock and I will remain here until all concerning parties are ready to depart.



McCoy and Calandra entered the transporter room where, to the Doctor's puzzlement, Mr. Scott greeted the child with a wide, friendly grin.

The engineer was not such a horrible person after all, even for an Earther, once you got to know him better, surmised Calandra. Why, he even offered to explain something called the Compton Effect, which he told me was discovered on Earth about three hundred years ago. The Compton Effect had to do with the fluctuations of ion waves and their uses. This conversation

evolved when he was fitting her with a Learning Translator, which permitted her to hear an alien tongue as it was actually spoken but permitted her brain waves to pick up the meaning independently of any translation to the Fabrini. "Off you go, Lass. Energizing."

"I thought you two didn't get along?" muttered the Doctor.

"We...communicate." she answered as they shimmered out.

They materialized in the familiar setting of the Great Hall. Calandra wordlessly went to her apartments, as McCoy walked towards the meeting room to find his companions.

"Bones! We were just talking about you..." called the Captain.

"All good, I hope. Confidante Morlis, I hope you don't mind the inconvenience..."

"No inconvenience at all, my friend!" Morlis beamed. "Today has been a landmark for peace on this world. Escorting you through our medical archives is the least I can do to express my gratitude. This way, gentlemen?" As they made their way through the corridors, Morlis inquired, "And where is your daughter, Dr. McCoy?"

"She forgot a text and came back to retrieve it. Confidante, are all the children here...I mean, are they all so...well, so bookish?"

The Confidante laughed heartily. "Oh, dear me, yes. Especially the new generation, now that there are no restrictions, you know and we do encourage them to learn all they can...but now, in Calandra's case - well, that

child is a born scholar. Such an insatiable appetite for knowledge! And quite a tinkerer, I'm told..."

"Brother, you can say that again," McCoy mused.



Calandra had decided to take another route, a more lengthy one, to arrive at her destination, partly because it was an interesting thing to do, and partly because she wanted to delay her roundezvous with McCoy. She had not been though these passages in a long time, and she studied the glyphs that adorned the walls with a benign curiosity. As she picked her way through the dim labyrinth, her ears perked up at the sound of a conversation taking place in one of the supposedly deserted foyers up ahead. Silently, she crept around a thick pylon and hid in the shadows, listening. What she heard made her hold her breath in disbelief.

"...Excellent, Caridor. And by now Losryd will have already met his unfortunate end at the hands of your men."

"Then you will be able to control the government of Thera, Sechack. How long will you wait before the ambush is 'discovered'?"

"Tomorrow, the messengers will enter the capital and announce the horrible treachery of the Yonadans. Then the people will rise up in the outrage and I acting Governor of Thera, will declare war on the enemy."

"And of course, when we are defeated, I shall rule New Fabrina as Governor of Regions."

"Don't worry, Caridor. You will be adequately compensated for your assistance when the time comes. The problem that faces us in the immediate future is the Federation Starship, which that idiot, Losryd, agreed to bring into the picture. By tomorrow, they will be gone, and after that the Federation would not dare to interfere, or the home-world would send a Fleet that would descend upon them like paza-creatures on shalises."

Calandra stood frozen to the floor. *Caridor! A traitor to us all! He was invested as Priest-Regent just two days ago!* She turned to hurry back to the Main Hall, but must have made some small noise, as the two conspirators were alerted.

"She's heard everything we've said! Don't let her escape!"

Calandra was glad that she was in such good physical condition. She was light on her feet, and more agile than the two adults. But her legs were shorter than theirs, and she felt the harsh grasp of a hand on her hair pulling her down.

"No!" she screamed, kicking and squirming to free herself. A burly hand clamped over her mouth to silence her. She took the opportunity to sink her teeth savagely into flesh, tasting blood. Her captor yelped in pain, and loosened his grip momentarily, allowing the Priestess to wriggle free and spring away again.

Frantically, she bolted down the endless array of twisting hallways, remembering that the men had come to the archives. She lost her pursuers for the time being, but it was certain that they would catch up with her. She

pushed her legs unmercifully on, her lungs on fire as she wondered angrily why no elevator was ever built in this section.

As she reached the entrance to the Archives, she saw the Confidante with the others at the end of the chamber. She staggered toward them, gasping out her plea.

"Mor...Morlis...there has been treachery...Caridor.... Captain, you must do something"

"Calandra, what are you talking about? Calm yourself..." the Confidante was alarmed.

"No...no time...They're coming..."

"Who's coming? What are you trying to say?" demanded Kirk.

"What the Priestess is trying to tell you, gentlemen, is that your lives are all in grave danger."

Startled, they looked up to see Caridor and Sechack calmly standing in the passageway, with a squadron of Tharan soldiers leveling weapons at them.

Sechack motioned to one of the sentries. "Get their weapons. And their communications devices as well, and have them pulverized. Afterward, drop them into the Benamasi Fissure in the Northern Wilderness and take these prisoners to one of the subterranean vaults. It will be night soon. When it arrives, I want them taken to the Outerlands and disposed of."

"If we don't report to our ship in twelve hours, my people will turn this planet inside out until we're found." announced Kirk

hotly.

"Perhaps. But it will be too late by then. You see, war is about to break out. Governor Losyrd has been murdered by impassioned Yonadan backsliders, whose breach of trust will not go unpunished. There will be a damning affidavit, provided by friend Caridor here. And perhaps, in a day or two, the bodies of the Priestess and her Confidante will be found. Of course, it will be discovered that they died at the hands of their own faithless people who also killed the brave Federation agents. But that is the unfortunate risk a soldier must take, no?"

"Sir, your motivations for this fiasco seem totally illogical. The cost of countless Tharan lives is unreasonably high, simply to conquer one's neighbors." said Spock in his characteristic monotone.

Sechack glowered contemptuously. "Soon this planet will be ruled by the strongest, and no one shall question our motives."

Morlis turned on Caridor, who had remained silent during this tirade. "You are a monster. How can you stroll idly through the blood and carnage of your own race!"

"Power can buy the soul of an ambitious man," interjected Sechack. "With plenty of change left over to comfort the conscience."

"Fiend!" the Confidante spat at Sechack. "You will not succeed in this hideous venture!"

The Imperial Minister approached the old man, his voice

like a serpent slithering across a glassy pool. "Ah, but who will be left to accuse us?" With the wave of a hand, Sechack ordered them to be taken away, as the guards urged them on at the point of their weapons.

They were marched along the winding, dark passageways, fallen in disuse long ago. The mind of Captain Kirk was by no means idle at this time. Counting on the smooth efficiency of his men he conveyed a subtle but understood signal to Spock and McCoy. The Doctor acknowledged by issuing a slight cough, while Spock bowed his head in an unobtrusive manner.

Satisfied that his message had been received, Kirk fell abruptly to the floor, surprising the two bewildered sentries, as Spock conveyed a powerful double-fisted blow to the weaponed hand of the nearest man before felling him completely with his nerve pinch. Jim Kirk rolled swiftly to his feet, attacking the other opponent before he had time to react to the offense. Simultaneously, the Good Doctor firmly launched himself toward the Confidante, his daughter pressed to him, forcing them to safety in a niche in the wall.

Taking the Theran laser weapons, they hurried back up the corridor, only to be surprised by more guards who had heard the scuffle. Attempting a retreat, they discovered that the first two had regained their senses and were in pursuit. They were trapped.

"In here!" ordered the Captain, motioning to a room. If they were going to die, they wouldn't do it without a fight. Suddenly, a strange shrill engulfed them.

The sound began to grow stronger, and more painful, until

it caused agony throughout their entire being, eventually becoming so intense that they seemed to be crushed by it. *They're killing us,* thought Calandra through the red wave of nauseous torment. She saw the world become a blazing, brilliant white, before it went to a sudden, final black.



Her body became liquid, floating apart, useless and meaningless. It was as though she could see herself, distorted and strange, a body without life or feeling. Then she heard a voice speaking to her, deliberately and intensely, but she could not understand the words. At first, they were but garbled sounds, unintelligible and incomprehensible, then they seemed to take the shape of distinct articulation, although unfamiliar and exotic sounding. Slowly, her mind became fully functional, but she remained unable to move, or even to open her eyes. The voice was persistent. There was something about it...

Another strange voice joined the first. Then she felt a hand, touching some object around her throat - the Learning Device...

"There, that should do it. Calandra...Calandra, can you understand me?" the Doctor urged, his face a mask of concern.

She moaned softly, fighting the narcosis.

"The Priestess seems to respond to the sound of your voice Doctor," observed Mr. Spock. "Perhaps if you continue trying to rouse her..."

"What the hell do you think I've been doing for the past ten

minutes!" snapped McCoy.

Her eyes fluttered open, focusing at last as Calandra took in her surroundings. Captured again. "Doctor McCoy," she noted woozily.

His smile conveyed his relief, as he patted her arm. She drew back stiffly. So, war does not create allies.

"Confidante?" she called weakly, glancing about the cell.

"I'm sorry," said Dr. McCoy, his voice filled with sympathy. "Morlis was caught by a blast. I can't help him now." He turned his head, indicating the prone figure of the dying man across the room, being made comfortable by Captain Kirk.

Her eyes blazed with denial as she rose to go to her old friend. "Confidante?" her quaking voice implored.

He fixed his gaze upon her, and a little smile crossed his lips.

"My Shining Sun," he whispered, his breathing ragged. "I am a clumsy old fool. Haven't the sense to move out of the way." He chuckled, making light of his impending doom. "We were all fools to be deceived so easily. Too long, too many centuries we were locked away in a hollow ball, ignorant of treacherous men. Our naivety has cost us much..." He turned to stare at the ceiling, his eyes filling with angry tears.

"But you," he said at last, "You are not easily taken. You are headstrong, not like your mother. I remember..." he smiled, his voice trailing off, as he recalled some long-forgotten incident.

He took her hand in his. "It was I, Calandra, who hesitated in carrying out Natira's dying request that you be united with your father. In my weakness, I could not bear to have you taken from me. Can you forgive the folly of a stupid old man?"

"Oh, Confidante, there is nothing to forgive. I had no desire to leave you either!"

"But I broke a sacred promise made to your mother. And because of that, you have been entangled in this nightmare!"

"No, no. You cannot blame yourself. I have no regrets." She felt his grip loosening in her hands. Looking nervously across the cell to the three Starmen speaking seriously in low tones to each other, she moved even closer to the Confidante, and said in a whisper, "I...I love you, grandfather."

"And you have given me nothing but joy since the day of your birth!" It was as though he had stayed alive just long enough to hear the cherished words. He closed his eyes, and with as much dignity as one could expect of such an act, quietly died.

Calandra stood up slowly, her head spinning. With all her effort, she fought to retain her composure. *I won't cry, she repeated over and over to herself. I won't, I won't, I won't. You can't be dead. I won't let you. But you are, and I am so afraid!*

She wrapped her long arms around herself, feeling very cold. "He is gone." She said thought trembling lips. McCoy nodded silently.

"I wasn't aware that he was your grandfather," Kirk replied softly.

Surprised and a little embarrassed that her indiscretion had been overheard, she answered, "It is not something we mention among others, especially strangers. It is considered a personal thing with us."

Kirk picked up on this, and dropped the subject.

The solemnity of the moment was broken abruptly by the intrusion of Caridor and the Theran guards. "Move them out of the city unobserved, and take them to the Saanik Deserts. I want the job done properly; make it look like a zealot execution. And bring the body of the old man along."

"I wish you were dead," hissed Calandra. "I hate you, I hate you. Do you hear me? I'm going to kill you!"

"Yes, of course you will." he mocked her contemptuously.

The captives were herded into a hover-craft that was used for cargo transportation. The driver and another man were separated by a thick partition from the prisoners and another guard, who eyed them cautiously from across the enclosure.

Calandra's head still hurt from the sonic disrupter effect that had assaulted every sensory organ in their bodies. As she sat on the floor of the vehicle, she found herself eyeing the strange-looking officer, the one called Spock, who seemed to be absorbed in some sort of game of concentration, his gaze fixed unfalteringly upon the sentry.

Curiously enough, the guard himself seemed to be rapidly losing his tense demeanor, and taking on a more tranquil, almost dreamlike expression. This interplay continued for perhaps twenty minutes or so, at which time the Captain, who also had been observing this phenomena with intense interest, pounced suddenly from his place onto the transfixed victim, grappling with him until he caught him in a strangling choke-hold, his own weapon pointed squarely under his chin.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. I really wasn't sure you could pull it off."

"Nor was I, sir. Such telepathic feats are rarely successful."

Kirk tightened his grip on the man's neck, causing him to gasp for air. "Tell the driver to land this thing, now."

The guard hesitated.

"DO IT!" He dragged the Theran roughly to the intercom.

"Bring the craft down, Jaris," he spoke into the transceiver, as Kirk brought the laser pistol up menacingly against the Therans throat. "I'm feeling ill, so one of you will have to change places with me."

"What's the matter Agati, does being confined with a corpse upset your stomach?" the driver laughed.

"Just bring this craft to a halt!" Agati snapped.

Sensing the descent of the aircar, Kirk flung his captive to his First Officer, who swiftly manipulated expert fingers to

compress a vital nerve in the neck.

Kirk readied himself.
"Bones, get the Priestess behind those crates. When I give the signal, run like hell. Are you ready, Mr. Spock?"

"Indeed, Captain."

"But what about my Grandfather?" cried Calandra.

"Right now, my main concern is with the living, and how to keep us that way. Now, take cover!"

The ship came to a standstill. Kirk and Spock stood pensive, each on either side of the hatchway. As the unsuspecting Theran opened it, Kirk fired a fatal blast with the laser, as Spock jumped down to relieve the dead man of his weapon.

"Move out!" ordered Captain Kirk. McCoy and his daughter vaulted out of the car and took off in a run, with Spock and Kirk following and defending the rear.

By this time the driver had heard the commotion, and was firing upon the escapees.

"Spread out! Weaving patterns!" yelled Kirk. "Head for those trees up ahead!"

The four figures separated, running erratically under the cover of darkness to avoid laser blasts that seemed to be exploding all around them. It was apparent that the other soldier had recovered from his neck-pinch and had joined in the assault.

The copse of trees loomed closer, and no one noticed as McCoy caught a blast that seered

through his right arm, sending him spinning and slamming his body brutally against the rock-hard ground, rendering his unconscious.

Then Spock saw him.

Kirk and the Priestess had reached the thicket when they realized that something was wrong. Turning, they watched as Spock darted back to where the motionless form of Leonard McCoy lay.

Dodging the onslaught of deadly beams, the Vulcan worked his way to the spot where the doctor had fallen. Effortlessly, he hoisted the older man onto his shoulder, and in a crouching position, started back to the safety of the forest as best as his muscles would get him there. From the sights and sounds around him, he ascertained that his effort was being defended by the Captain.

A burst ignited uncomfortably near as Spock ploughed forward. After what seemed to be an eternity, Spock reached the sanctuary of the woods. Kirk and Spock carried McCoy deep into the dense, protective overgrowth, where they laid the limp body carefully on the ground. Weapons poised in anticipation, they waited.

The ominous hum of laser-fire came to a halt. Eventually, they heard the engines of the hover-craft start up, announcing that the Therans had retreated.

"They're gone," Kirk stated.

"They'll be back," warned Calandra. "They'll send scouts to search the area. They'll kill us for sure, but they won't risk

attracting attention with big weapons.

"Lets pray Mr. Scott gets to us before they do," Kirk wished out loud, then turnd his attention to Dr. McCoy, who was being examined by Mr. Spock. "How is he?"

"Difficult to say at this point. The laser effect cauterized any major rupture to the artery, keeping bleeding to a minimum, but not ruling out infection. There seems to be no damage in bone or ligaments. There is however, evidence of some dislocation of one of the thoracic segments of the spinal column, and there appears to be some trauma to the brain. He will not be able to walk, Jim."

"Well, we can't just wait around here for them to pick us off. We'll have to make some kind of sled to carry him on using the branches and shrubbery available. We can use the lasers to cut the stouter pieces."

The moon had begun its ascent. By its light, they labored in the cold night air, gathering the appropriate materials, and lashing them together with thin strips of cloth rended from the cuffs of their trousers. Calandra remained eerily silent as she worked, and Kirk wondered if the shock of McCoy having rubbed elbows with death had shaken her out of her attitude of resentment. He glanced over to where she knelt binding soft shrubbery branches together. Her eyes were fixed on the prone figure of her father. Kirk decided it must have been a trick of the moonlight, and that he had not seen a tear glistening on her small face.

Some two hours had passed before they lifted the Doctor, still unconscious, onto the make-shift litter. Kirk and Spock each took hold of a side-pole, and prepared to drag their burden deeper into the wilderness.

The Captain looked at Calandra, who stood transfixed, staring soberly at the bright, yellow moon. "Priestess? We have to go, now." he said gently.

She shook her head slowly. "I can't."

"You have to," he repeated.

"No. Not me. I'm going back. My people need me. I've got to tell them what has happened; I have to lead them."

Kirk gave his hand-hold to Spock, who set the litter down.

"You'll come with us." It was a flat, calm order.

"Don't you see, I have to! I am Priestess. My people won't hurt me. And they won't let the Therans touch me. I won't go with you!"

He eyed her levelly. "Now you listen to me. You're not Priestess anymore; not here, not now. You won't get two kilometers out there. You're nothing more than bait for whatever scavengers are waiting for you!"

They stood there, in the icy night, glaring at each other, a silent contest of wills ensuing.

"The people need me. ...I'm going back." She set her jaw, those blazing blue eyes defying him.

Kirk fought to control his

desire to shake this child until her teeth rattled. He gripped her forearms. "I am not going to say this again. You are the responsibility of Dr. McCoy, and while he is incapacitated, you are my responsibility. And like it or not, you're coming with us!"

He waited, not quite sure how the strong-arm approach would be taken. In the moonlight, he saw her features soften in strained resignation, and he knew he had won. This time.



Back on the Enterprise, Scotty had been pacing irritably on the bridge.

"Lieutenant Commander Uhura, have you gotten through to the Yonadans yet?"

"Still trying, Sir."

"Aye. Well, if you can't establish communications within twenty minutes, permission or no, I'm sendin' a landing party down there to find them!"

As if in response that the ultimatum, the beautiful Communications Officer hastily reported, "Mr. Scott! Contact has been restored to the planet. Priest-Regent Caridor is responding."

"Put him on visual, Uhura."

The figure of Caridor appeared on the view screen. "Ah, Enterprise. We must apologize for the inconvenience you have endured" he lied smoothly. "There's been a temporary power surge that interrupted our communications frequencies. What may I do for you?" He smiled.

"This is Commander Montgomery Scott. We have been trying to locate the Captain and the rest of the landing party who are long overdue - with no response. We are very concerned for their safety."

Caridor feigned a rather puzzled demeanor. "That is most disquieting news, Commander. You see, the three Federation Officers, along with the Priestess, were last seen leaving the main city with the Confidante, on an informal tour of the Yonadan colonies. I had assumed that they had since returned to their ship, and that the Confidante had returned for the night. This is most distressing...we, of course, will conduct a thorough search and a full investigation. Be assured that we will help you resolve this matter in whatever way we can."

"Thank you, sir. We'll be dispatchin' search parties at once. Enterprise out."

Scotty's brow furrowed in thought as the viewed faded. "Now, why d'you suppose Morlis would take our people on a sight-seeing tour, and not include the Ambassador? Uhura, tell Mr. Cassel I'd like to have a word with him. Mr. Chekov, is there any way we can pinpoint the location of a communicator on that planet while it's inactive?"

"It can be a pretty tricky process, and an unreliable one, sir. But I could trace the ionization trail of specific mineral elements, such as thorium, which is not indigenous to this world. The scanners would have to be amplified to boost enhancement. It is a slow and tedious procedure, but not impossible."

"Good. Get started right off, lad, and use as many technicians as you need. Start with a given point in the city, then rotate outward until you come up with something.." He rubbed his chin. "There's somethin' about our Mr. Caridor that just doesn't sit right with me..."

"If you ask me," interjected Sulu, who had been attentive to the interplay, "he smiles too damn much."

"Aye," agreed Mr. Scott, nodding absently.



The sky was beginning to lighten when they finally stopped to rest. They had covered a sizeable distance in one night, and they collapsed, exhausted, in a grassy clearing.

Kirk strained to see against the remaining shadows, looking around him. "Mr. Spock, any idea where we are?"

"No, sir, but judging from the velocity and the amount of time spent on our journey here, I would say that we are somewhere within a radius of approximately 800 kilometers of New Fabrina."

Great, thought Kirk. He turned his attention to McCoy, who was beginning to stir. Calandra lay on the cool ground, head turned and regarding the Doctor with dispassionate curiosity. Kirk and Spock moved toward the litter.

"Bones? No, don't try to move. You're going to be okay."

McCoy licked his dry lips. "Feels like...hammer...inside my head."

"You have suffered a severe concussion, Doctor," explained Spock. "Also a dislocated vertebra. You must remain still, or you might rupture one of your intervertebral discs."

"Who...died...left YOU surgeon?"

Jim Kirk smiled. Even in this condition, McCoy could still deliver a well-aimed insult. He placed a hand on his friend's shoulder, and instantly felt the heat that indicated an elevated temperature. They had to get out of this predicament, and soon.

Spock stood up. "Captain, I suggest we locate a water source and some sort of nourishment. All of us, specially Dr. McCoy, will need sustenance in order to continue.

"Yes, of course. We'll wait until full light, then scout around. Maybe we can get our bearings while we're at it. The Priestess can remain here with McCoy."

Calandra showed no change in expression at this remark, nor did she after they had left. She remained sentient lying back in the moist grass, observing the gentle swaying of the trees above her. Her thoughts turned to the man on the litter. *I won't love you Leonard McCoy, she thought painfully. I can't because if you died, it would hurt all over again. Like when Mother died, and grandfather too,...*

McCoy muttered to himself in a fitful sleep. Afraid he might cry out in pain, she got up and moved to where he lay, still strapped to the sled. She stared at him curiously, observing for

the first time the resemblance they shared.

He grimaced, hurting in his sleep, and she noted the sweat that ran down his face and drenched his clothing. A slight twinge of compassion stirred inside her. Tearing a piece of her sleeve, she wiped his face, looking uncomfortably about to make certain she was unobserved in this shameless act of mercy.



"Chekov, ha' you gotten anything on that contraption yet?" Said Mr. Scott, growing impatient.

"Negative, sir, no unusual radiation yet," answered the Russian, not taking his eyes from the scanner. He ignored the exasperated tone of voice, knowing full well, like everyone else, that the Scotsman was happier down below, in the company of his engines.

"Mr. Scott, I'm getting a message from the Tharan Government...they say that the treaty has been flagrantly violated by the Yonadans, and they insist we beam up all search parties and leave Pollux 4 at once." said Uhura anxiously.

"That can't be true!" exclaimed Mr. Cassel, bounding forward from where he had been observing the operations. "There could be no way, by any stretch of the imagination, that the Yonadans would do anything to impede the peace!"

"The Governor of Thera has been assassinated," continued Uhura, "and the home world is sending warships to enforce the terms of the agreement."

"Terms? What terms?" Scott demanded, confused.

The Ambassador swallowed; his mouth felt uncomfortably dry. "According to the agreement signed and sanctioned by both parties, any act of war, such as what the Therans are claiming, is an immediate capitulation of all rights on the part of the offender."

"Are you trying to say, Mr. Cassel, that the Therans can just come right in, take over the entire planet, and there's not a thing we can do about it?"

"Basically, that's the gist of it. You see, the Yonadans were desperate for peace. They would have agreed to any reasonable policy, and this was a totally feasible solution to them. As a race, they abhor violence."

"Well, they're in for more than their share of it now. Commander send a message to the Tharan authorities. Tell them we have no proof that the Governor was assassinated by the Yonadans, and without such, we will defend New Fabrina as a member of the Federation at all costs."

Uhura's face was grim as she received the reply. "They submit that they have unquestionable evidence, and are now transmitting it to be documented by our computer."

Scotty switched on the computer console, and solemnly watched the damning printout being recorded. He knew that this information was also on its way to the Federation Council, who would have no choice but to uphold the ordinance.

"Mr. Scott!" exclaimed Sulu. "Picking up a Theran Class 2 Warship on long-range sensors. She's heading straight for us!"

"Raise all deflector shields, and stand by on Yellow Alert. Uhura, send this to the Therans: we concede your decision; however, the missing members of our shore party remain neutral. If you do not allow us to continue our search, we will be forced to defend ourselves."

No one so much as exhaled as they awaited a reply. This was Scotty's last trump card; he was using it now.

"They're giving us three minutes to leave orbit," said Uhura tensely.

"Sound general quarters. Go to Red Alert."

"What are you going to do?" croaked Cassel.

"I'm going to try to bluff our way of of this. If that doesn't work, we'll have to fight."

"Two minutes," stated Uhura.

"Repeat message, Commander.

Tension ran high. Lt. Checkov, back at his weapons console, wiped the beads of perspiration that were beginning to form on his forehead. Sulu remained taut and alert, eyes never wavering from the image of the approaching warship.

"They've given us thirty hours to continue our search," said Uhura, breathing a sigh of relief. "With no more than four individuals allowed on the surface at one time. They will accept no

responsibility for casualties that might ensue."



CAPTAIN'S LOG -- Stardate 6508.04

After a lengthy search, Mr. Spock and I have finally found a source of drinkable water, and by a stroke of good fortune, have also discovered a gourd-like plant that can be hollowed out, making it possible to carry an adequate supply back with us. Science Officer Spock has also identified some edible vegetation that seems to be abundant here.

If we can avoid the Therans by hiding out in this environment, there is a good chance that the Enterprise will find us sooner or later. Due to the deteriorating condition of my Chief Medical Officer, I can only hope that it will be sooner...



Kirk had been filling the largest of the gourds with the pure, clear water when he looked up to see Spock beckoning to him. Leaving the vessels by the stream, he climbed the hillock where Spock stood waiting.

"Captain, there, over that ridge." Spock pointed to the distant edge of the forest. "Theran patrols; two off to the right, a third has already penetrated to the left. They are still a comfortable distance away, but we must be on our guard from now on."

The Captain nodded his agreement, relieved that he thought to leave his laser pistol with Calandra. He hoped she knew how to use it.

"I have also noted the existence of a mountain range in that direction," continued Spock, pointing it out to Kirk. "If we begin after we have rested and taken nourishment, we may be able to reach it before nightfall, where the ridges and bluffs will afford considerable protection."

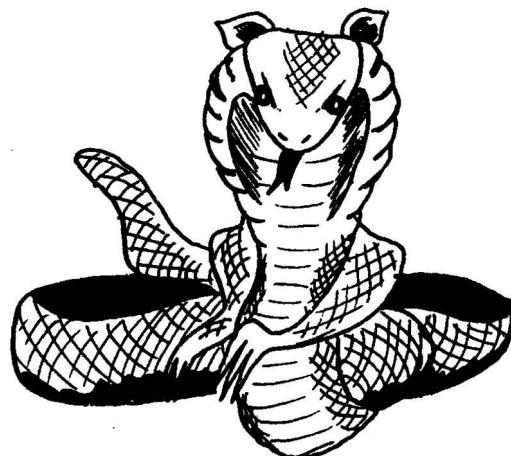
"An excellent suggestion, Mr. Spock." Kirk glanced back to where the scouting parties had already disappeared into the brush. "We'd better get going, then. By the time we get back to camp, the morning will be gone.

Calandra was curled up on her side, drifting through a slumber that was needed but not wanted. Stay awake, her brain ordered, but her body refused to obey.

Something jolted her back to consciousness - some sound - perhaps or no, not quite a sound, but a feeling. She opened her eyes and sat up slowly.

A shudder of revulsion raced through her whole being. There, maybe two meters away, loomed a giant gheti snake, a hideous inhabitant of this world, uncommon to come by as a rule, but nonetheless ghastly enough to invoke stories told by small boys in order to frighten their compatriots. It's greenish-yellow body slithered along the ground, its upper most half raised, eyeing her menacingly. The gheti has a rounded, triangular-shaped head, with bat-like ears, large purple eyes, and deadly poisonous fangs to immobilize its victims before tearing them apart into more convenient pieces with its claws, which extend from thin, black, sinewy limbs. It is a large creature, about half the size of a small child, easily excited by sound as well as movement. The

gheti is nondiscriminatory in its choice of victims - a small humanoid would be as welcome a feast as a jobat.



Calandra forced her frantic mind to function. *Think! Where is the weapon that Captain Kirk gave you? Could it be reached without arousing the gheti?*

The blood rushed from her face, and she felt sick inside as she realized she had left it beside the litter when ministering to McCoy. "Please go away. Oh, please go away! I'm not very tasty anyhow," she whispered shakily to the Gheti. She closed her eyes. "Oh Wise Ones," she prayed, "Make it go away!"

The gheti began to move toward her, darting its head back and forth in curiosity. Calandra was frozen, more from terror than cautiousness. Something whizzed past her line of vision, accompanied by a familiar hum. As the snake jerked violently backward, she knew instantly that it had been shot with a laser.

For a moment, she was unable to take her eyes from the writhing

animal in its death throes. Then she turned her head slowly, as if in a trance, but instead of finding Kirk or Spock, it had been McCoy who had awakened just in time to witness the scene, and had destroyed the creature with the nearby pistol.

He laid his head back down, as though the effort had exhausted him, still clutching the weapon in his hand. "Calandra," he rasped weakly. "It's alright now. You can get up."

She did not move, still shattered by what had just transpired.

"Calandra...Callie. Come here." His voice was soothing.

She forced herself up, walking shakily in the direction of the litter, her eyes wide with shock.

"Are you okay now?"

She looked at him as though she did not understand what he was saying.

"Callie, listen to me. It's all over. Nothing will hurt you; you're safe. Understand?"

She nodded, comprehension registering in her face. "Yes. Safe." She sat down beside him, knees pulled up to her chest, and clasped her hands around her ankles. She sat very still and quiet, as though she were analyzing the situation with much effort.

A few minutes passed. Finally she raised her head, looked off into the void, and started to say something. As though she had changed her words at the last minute, she replied, "Thank you."

When the Captain and Spock returned from the foraging expedition, Calandra had recovered sufficiently to give a sketchy account of the events, the details filled in by the now-awakened Dr. McCoy. They regarded the dead thing with some interest, then hid its body among the leaves and woodland debris to avoid giving up any clues of their presence to the Therans.

Having given him food and drink, Spock attempted to lower the Doctor's temperature with cloths dipped in the remaining water.

McCoy peered up at him, a glint in his eye. "You make a marvelous Florence Nightingale. Ever think about a career in nursing?"

"Do not be insolent, Doctor." Spock placed his palm on McCoy's forehead. "You are still pyretic."

"Yeah, and on top of that, I feel hot."

Spock refused to be baited. "How are your other symptoms?"

"Oh, just dandy. My arm is on fire, my head keeps pounding the 'Anvil Chorus', I can't even move without my entire body cussing me out, and I feel like I've been shot at and hit."

"Obviously, since that is precisely what happened." said Spock dryly.

McCoy chose to ignore that. "Why is it that every time I come in contact with these people, I wind up flat on my back?"

"I believe you humans call

it, 'luck'."

Calandra joined them, and taking the cloth from Spock's hands, announced, "I can take care of him."

Both men looked at her in astonishment. She explained, a trifle awkwardly, "Mr. Spock has not rested, whereas I have. It is the least I can do." She avoided eye contact, as she busied herself detachedly.

Kirk had just settled warily under a broad-leaved tree and was sipping some water when Spock joined him. "I think she's starting to like him." commented the Captain softly,

Spock looked up, mildly surprised. "Oh? It does not seem evident."

"Perhaps it's only obvious to us emotional creatures, Mr. Spock," replied Kirk fondly. "She's warming up. Won't admit it, though; a head like a rock."

"Heredity, no doubt."

"Right."



"Meester Scott! We've got something!"

Scotty rushed over to the console where the young Lt. had been laboring for over nearly seven hours. He fidgeted with some controls, nervously double-checking his accuracy.

"There, sir; it's definitely Thorium. And it's radiating from..." he crossed referenced to location, "...here. There's something down there for certain

sir."

"Aye, lad. Good work. We'll get two men down there to investigate. Would you care to be one of them, Lt.?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Alright, then. You and Hernandez report to the transporter room in five minutes. We'll be in touch for any information you find. Use long range tricorders, medical and otherwise."

Tricorders...it reminded Scotty momentarily of the little girl with the sad blue eyes, lost down there somewhere with the others...



They plodded on, saying little except to ascertain the most efficient route, or when they stopped to rest and find food. Calandra offered to accompany Spock, stating that she could be of help due to her knowledge of the local flora. They made their way through the foliage, leaving Kirk with McCoy.

Jim Kirk stretched his aching muscles, trying to exorcise the kink in the back of his neck that nagged him after hours of dragging half the weight of a man. "Do you want some water, Bones?"

"No. Got any booze?"

Kirk grinned. He must be feeling better. "Sorry, mac, fresh out. Try the joint down the road." He sat down to remove his boots, then thought the better of it, worried that he might not be able to get them back on again. After a brief silence, he spoke up.

"She's got your constitution."

"If you mean she's bullheaded, irritable, and stubborn as all get-out, I agree with you."

Kirk shrugged, looking amused. Then his expression changed, more serious now. "Bones," he began dolefully, "If I'm out of line, tell me to go jump in the creek. But it's obvious how the Priestess feels about this whole thing. How do you feel about it?"

McCoy shifted his weight painfully. His condition was getting progressively worse. He gave the matter some thought, then said, "I don't know, Jim. I guess I'm feeling threatened. Or maybe 'unsure' is a better word for it. Guilty as hell, that's for sure. I suppose I'd like to have one more crack at being somebody's 'daddy', but I wonder if I even deserve the chance. I feel like a failure, and I haven't even started.

"You'll get that chance," Kirk assured him.

"Maybe. The odds aren't that favorable right now."

"Now you sound like Spock."

"Thanks a heap."

Shortly afterwards, Spock and Calandra returned with the provisions the sylvan landscape had offered. "There is a Tharan encampment due west of here, some twenty kilometers." Spock reported. "However, there is no danger at this distance."

"Just the same, I think we'd better get moving," the Captain decided, using his sleeve to wipe

the tuber that would be his dinner. "We still have a way to go yet."

"I could see those mountains from the clearing," Calandra piped up. "I'm sure that I have been there before. I was with mother on an official visit to the outer colonies, and we stopped there because it was so pretty. I remember it because there were caves there; I played in them. They're very deep."

Kirk found it odd to imagine this austere youngster at play. He reminded himself that children are the same all over, regardless of their mental capacities. Even the restrained Vulcan children played games amongst themselves. Perhaps that was the solution; maybe if everyone stopped treating this child like an adult...

Spock's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Jim, a subterranean cavern would be most advantageous to our strategy."

"Agreed. Calandra, do you think you could find the location again?"

"Of course I can!" stated the Priestess, as though her pride had been slighted.



Scotty moved uncomfortably in the command chair. "Are y' absolutely certain, Mr. Chekov?"

"Absolutely, sir. We've run tricorder readings on every possible comparative scan within a hundred kilometers. No humanoid life, alive or...or otherwise."

"It appears that the communicators, phasers, and other

equipment have been obliterated and the remains cast into a deep ravine. It could be a ploy to throw us off the track."

That was precisely what had occurred to Scott. "Alright. Get back up here on the double. We're goin' to comb every inch of this planet if we have to. Only this time, we'll scan for Vulcanoid vitals. If we can locate Mr. Spock, the others are sure to be with him." At least there was still a chance.



The sun was sinking below the horizon when they reached the bluff. McCoy had slipped back into a feverish delirium drifting in and out of consciousness. Kirk and Spock spoke in hushed whispers, mostly about the slimness of their chances of being rescued, and their concern for their friend, who showed no sign of improvement. Calandra listened attentively, regardless of her Yonadan values that disapproved of eavesdropping.

"It is imperative that the Doctor obtain medical attention," stressed Spock.

"I know; I feel so useless."

"We haven't even a simple antipyretic to help lower his fever. Even a blanket would be propitious."

"All we can do is wait and hope."

It took Calandra very little time to locate the entrance to the cave. Had it grown dark earlier, it would have been nearly impossible, but her memory was good, and she recalled the baffles

and blind alleys with impeccable clarity.

"At least we can have a fire," said Kirk, ruefully.

"Speaking of fire, Captain, look." Spock stood on a high mound, surveying the area. He pointed to a faint glow that could be seen in the forest they had just left.

Kirk climbed up to where the Vulcan was. "Therans. They're getting closer."

"Yes. But we are still in an advantageous position."

"You mean we're pretty safe up here."

"I believe I said that."

They dropped to the ground and went to carry McCoy into the cave. Calandra remained momentarily, scurrying up the rise to observe the speck of light that pierced the shadows.

Inside the cavern they set up camp and started a small but comfortable fire, placing McCoy close to it. He had begun to shiver violently now.

Exhausted, Kirk and Spock collapsed against the rough wall and closed their eyes. It was the first sleep they would enjoy in two days, and soon they plunged into a deep, dreamless, and much deserved slumber.

Calandra waited until she was certain they would not wake up; then carefully and noiselessly, she crept from the cavern and found her way down the winding maze of rocks and hills. This was something that had to be done, she told herself, but knew she would

be prevented from doing so if her intentions became known to the men from the stars. Instinct and sheer luck led her to her destination, down the path through the woods. She prayed silently that she would not meet another Gheti...

The blood pounded in her head as she cautiously approached the encampment. gingerly, she stole her way around the trees, silently calculating her next move. Good, they were all asleep. She must be ever so careful...slowly, now, not a sound...even her very breathing must be controlled.

Once, she had stalked a troop of wild salishes for half a day without making the slightest noise to arouse the sharp-eared creatures. She could have followed them further still, had Felina, who had been sent to retrieve her for the dancing lesson, not crashed through the thicket so carelessly, frightening the animals into a frenzied run. But this was no game, and Felina was safely asleep in her bed - she hoped.

The light that they had mistaken for fire, was, in fact, a battery-powered lantern, casting long shadows about the camp and revealing the dome-shaped shelters that housed the sleeping Therans. There was no guard posted; they had no reason to fear unarmed fugitives fleeing for their lives.

Methodically, she made her way to the stack of supplies that had been heaped against a tree. There were two blankets; she took these and spread them on the ground, and began placing items in the center. Some tins of food. A med-kit, complete with scanner. And last, but most importantly, a Theran communicator. She bundled

the contraband into the blankets, and sneaked quietly out of the camp, completely undetected. She was an excellent thief, she revelled. But of course, she had always known that. Only she could successfully sneak in and out of the kitchen undetected by the keen eye of Widu the Cook. When the aroma of fresh-baked kis-kias and nubies wafted throughout the Great Hall, Calandra could snitch the tasty morsels without being caught and scolded as Davin and Felina would have been.

The way back to the cave was tiring with the weight she bore. She wondered to herself how Kirk and Spock had carried McCoy all this way. No wonder they slept so soundly. The Priestess of Yonada entered the cave as quietly as she left it, some three hours earlier. She dropped her burden and padded over to the sleeping men. There would be hell to pay for such an act of blatant disobedience, but that was now merely academic.

Spock's sensitive ears detected her approach, and he rose smoothly to a sitting position, eyeing her questioningly.

"I have medicine for Dr. McCoy," she told him. "And blankets and rations. And something else ..." she handed down the communicator, which he accepted with surprise.

By this time, Kirk, too had awakened, rubbing his eyes and trying to get his bearings. "What's going on?" he asked groggily.

Spock, assessing the situation, did not remove his gaze from Calandra and stated carefully, "You have been to the Theran encampment."

"Yes," she confessed. "But I was not seen."

"Perhaps. But it will only be a matter of time before the theft is discovered." He went directly to McCoy with the med-kit.

If he were not before, Kirk was fully awake now. For a second, he was taken aback in disbelief. Then he grabbed her by the forearms and exploded in anger, "Have you lost your mind! Of all the irresponsible, bone-headed, LOONY ideas! You could have gotten yourself killed!"

She had expected nothing less than this. She pulled herself up to her full height of four and a half feet, and addressed him stoically. "Captain, you simply do not understand. We will now be able to signal for help. We have a means of communication. I knew exactly what I was doing. ... I was only trying to help."

He stared at her incredulously. She was speaking to him as though he were the child. Fighting to control his wrath, he let go her arms and glared at her fiercely. Then he lowered his voice. "If you EVER pull a stunt like that again," he said through clenched teeth, "I will personally paddle your backside for you." He stormed off to join Spock, who was placing one of the blankets over McCoy.

She stared after him, perplexed. What he had said was definitely to be taken as a threat of some kind, but she could not figure out what a paddle and the side of her back had to do with each other. Perhaps the Learning Translator was beginning to wear down...

Spock put the communicator down with some consternation. "I am afraid, Captain, that we have a problem. This device is operating on such a limited frequency that I believe that the only persons to receive our message would be the Therans, at whose wave-length we would be transmitting.

The Captain swore under his breath.

"However," continued Spock, "I might be able to boost the signal. I am not sure if the frequency can be altered. I will try to do so, but I need time, and one of the lasers. If I can adjust the oscillator by incorporating the components in the laser mechanism into the ..."

"Just...just, do it, Mr. Spock." said Kirk irritably, inducing a raised eyebrow from his First Officer. "I'm going outside to keep watch just in case the Therans pick up little miss hot-shot's trail. I'll check back later to see how you're doing. He picked up the remaining laser and left, taking with him one beauty of a headache.

Spock retired to the solitude of a secluded spot across the expanse of the cavern, where he set about working his genius on the task at hand.

McCoy came to slowly, disoriented. For once, there was little pain, and he wondered at this and also at the blankets that covered him, but shoved the inquiries to the back of his mind as he turned his head to find Calandra, huddled near the fire, shivering in the night air. She appeared to him to be the loneliest thing he had ever encountered, and his heart went

out to her.

"Callie," he spoke, in a soft voice. She looked over her shoulder at him, and in her eyes she could see the barricades she had set up around herself. "Come here," he suggested.

She glanced over to Spock, who was either too engrossed in his undertakings to notice, or pretended not to.

She got up slowly, and moved to McCoy's side. He shifted himself to a semi-sitting position, leaning against the wall of the cave, and feeling just a little triumphant in his accomplishment.

"Perhaps you should not be up so soon," she offered nervously.

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing; I'm a Doctor." he reminded her ruefully.

His mind began to operate more clearly. "Where..." he began, indicating the blankets and the nearby med-kit that he knew was responsible for his improved condition.

"I stole them. From the Therans."

"You?" he queried, skeptical.

"Yes," she said, defiance creeping into her tone. "And I am not sorry. I gave the matter much thought before arriving at the only sensible solution."

Well, that sure struck a nerve, he thought. I wonder what it was I missed? "Are you cold"

"No."

"Then why are you shivering?"

She looked at him, slightly

abashed, then bit her lip and shifted her gaze back to the fire.

"You know," he went on, attempting a different approach, "When a patient comes to me with an ailment, the first thing I ask is where it hurts. Now, if he can't, or won't tell me, I won't know where to start to heal him. Pain is a signal that there's something wrong; if you deny that pain exists, you can't expect to get well. You just get worse, until it's too late."

She shot him a suspicious look. "I'm not ill."

"No, not physically. But I'll bet my eye teeth there's a lot of emotional pain."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Let's start with the obvious. How do you feel about what's going on this very minute in New Fabrina?"

The eyes changed, a hint of panic. One deflector shield down. "I feel...I...should be there." she began to clench and unclench her fists in frustration. "As though there's something I should be doing, but I don't know what it is!" She turned full on him, alarm in her voice.

Immediately, he felt ashamed of himself for having ripped so insensitively at her defenses. "Callie, listen to me. On Earth, there's this saying. It goes something like, 'you can't carry the weight of the world on your shoulders'. Nobody expects you to take on the responsibilities of an entire planet! No one person is capable of that!" He took her small hand in his, and for the first time, she did not pull away.



"You're not a stone god. You're just a little girl, and the sooner you realize that the better off you're going to be." He reached up to touch her cheek, and was startled when a tear spilled onto his finger. Gently he drew her close to him, and wrapped the blankets around her shoulders.

In the protective circle of his arms, the long-overdue sobs began, her tears dampening his shirt where she buried her face. He whispered reassuring sounds, stroking her hair and rocking her tenderly until she cried herself to sleep.

The hours passed. It was near morning when James Kirk entered scrutinizing the scene with amazement as he crossed over to where Spock was putting the finishing touches on his handiwork. He nodded to the sleeping figures. "When did that happen?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. The affairs of humans and their emotional outbursts were unsettling enough to his Vulcan upbringing, and to admit having overheard such an interaction would have been a gross intrusion of privacy.

Kirk respected this and changed the subject. "Have you got that thing working yet?"

"Affirmative. However, the interior of this cavern is sufficient to baffle the signal profoundly. It will be necessary to go outside for transmission."

"Excellent. Let's go."

They stood up, but promptly fell to the ground when the solid mass beneath them began to quiver profusely. It was a land tremor;

something Terrans would call an earthquake.

McCoy and Calandra awakened simultaneously the initial confusion soon giving way to deadly recognition. The sickening sound of deep rumbling below the ground echoed in the recesses of Calandra's memory, and once again she could hear the haunting screams of dying people, trapped mercilessly in the tunnel that terrible day. She could see the faces of men, women, and children, contorted in agony, and the battered body of her mother. She recalled how she and Morlis had tried in vain to release Natira from the twisted metal that pinned her down, watching helplessly as death had slipped its cold hand over the last spark of her endurance, calmly snuffing it out.

Another violent shock assailed them. She forced her eyes open, and looking up toward the ceiling of the cave, felt the blood drain from her face as she spotted the overhanging rock that was about to shake loose from its place and come crashing down upon them.

"LOOK OUT!" she screamed frantically, her voice piercing the sonorous din. McCoy followed her gaze, and giving one mighty shove, pushed Calandra clear as he managed to roll just inches from the falling boulder.

The tremors ceased as suddenly as they had started. As the dust settled, Kirk called out, "Is everyone alright?"

"Unhurt here, Captain," replied Spock.

"Bones! You two okay?" Kirk stumbled over to his friend.

"Yeah, Jim. Callie, how about you?"

"I'm alright," she coughed, clearing her lungs of airborn soot.

Spock searched for the med-kit and found it under the fallen slab, demolished. He went to Dr. McCoy, who still remained on his stomach, gathering his strength to sit up. The Vulcan reached for McCoy's leg, and unceremoniously gave it a sharp pinch.

"OUCH! What the hell are you doing?"

"Sorry, Doctor. It was necessary to determine whether or not you had sustained injury to the spinal cord."

"Well, don't you think I would know it if I had? If I wanted a second opinion, I damn sure wouldn't be asking you, you blasted..."

"Gentlemen, please! The situation at hand, if you will." ordered Kirk.

"Captain, the entrance," indicated Spock.

They turned their attention to the opening of the cave, now sealed solidly with rock and debris.

They stood silent for a moment, then started to examine the obstruction more closely.

"One flimsy laser won't penetrate this," observed Captain Kirk.

"Then we're trapped in here," said McCoy.

"No, wait," chimed in Calandra. "I think there's another way out."

All eyes were upon her.

"When I was here before, Ailya and I were playing a game of 'Solitude'; I would hide, and she would have to call out and tell me where I was without my seeing her.

"Well, anyway, I had climbed a tree, and was well hidden among the leaves, when I heard her calling out, 'Calandra, I see you in that tree; I dare you to see me.' That tree was the only thing for half a kilometer around where one could hide, except for a fissure in the ground among some rocks. I waited for Ailya to emerge, but instead, she came out of this entrance."

"Captain," offered Spock, "Even if such an opening exists, there is no guarantee that it has not been sealed off by the quake as well, or that we will be able to find it at all."

"That's what I like about you, Spock," interjected the Doctor acidly. "You're always so encouraging."

"Well, we can't just sit around here and do nothing," said the Captain. "Spock, you and I will scout out the passageways and see what we can find."

"But Captain, I'm sure I will be able to find it," said Calandra. "Let me go too. I can at least guide you in the general direction."

"Well," sighed McCoy, pulling himself with considerable effort to his feet. "I'll be damned if I'm gonna stick around here twiddlin' my thumbs. We'll all

go. Just one big happy family, right, Spock?"

"Doctor you are not well enough to be walking yet. I would suggest..."

"Shut up, Spock! I am perfectly capable of diagnosing my own condition, so you can take in your shingle and stick it with your suggestions!" He steadied himself with one of the poles taken from the litter, staggering slightly.

"Bones, are you sure you're alright?" asked Jim Kirk.

"Why does everyone keep asking me if I'm alright? Of course I'm alright! I'm a doctor, remember?" he snapped.

"Doctor McCoy," continued Spock, "You are indeed the most stubborn man I have ever known. However, since you insist on pushing your body beyond its capabilities, I offer my assistance."

There is a complex rapport that flows between these friendly antagonists that even they fail to understand. Eventually McCoy grunted his acceptance and Spock slipped his shoulder under the Doctor's arm to support him as they moved through the subterranean passages with only the light of a torch that Captain Kirk had fashioned from a stout branch.

They had been walking for some time now, and the torch was beginning to burn down. Calandra had started to wonder if she had been right in her hypotheses concerning the secondary opening.

Kirk glanced back at McCoy, who by this time was almost being carried by Mr. Spock. "We'll rest

here for a few minutes. I'm going to have a look up ahead."

Spock wordlessly eased the Doctor to the ground, then sat down next to him with Calandra.

The Captain investigated the honeycombed labyrinth that permeated the cavern, peering a short distance down each.

If there is one characteristic of the Fabrini that sets them apart from other races of humanoids, it is their sensitivity to changes of light, probably due to the controlled lighting conditions built into the ancient planet-ship of Yonada.

It was probably this factor that caused Calandra to notice a subtle diversity in illumination that went unnoticed by the others when Kirk shifted the torch further into the shadows. At first she ignored it, then was compelled to look up.

There, right above them, in the high vaulted ceiling of the cave, was a circle of light, emanating from a chimney that extended almost vertical through rock and soil. They had been standing under it all this time!

By this time, Spock had noticed it too, and had directed Kirk and McCoy's attention to it.

The opening stretched upward to the surface about twenty meters or so, and the beginning of the orifice was still at least three meters above them.

"Spock," contemplated Kirk, "What if one of us stands on the others' shoulders; do you think he could pull through and work his way to the outside?"

"Getting into the opening is not the problem, Jim. The passage is simply too narrow for a man to squeeze through."

Kirk looked at Calandra.
"What about her?"

"Quite possibly," nodded Spock. "Of course, she would also have to operate the communicator, making the necessary adjustments in frequency when she surfaces."

"Now just one minute!" objected McCoy, "You can't send a child through that!"

"Bones, there isn't any other choice." Kirk dropped to one knee and looked at Calandra earnestly.

"Well, Priestess? Are you game?"

She nodded resolutely. "I think I can."

"Right. Now, when you get up there, you hail the ship with this communicator; Mr. Spock will show you how to use it. When you receive a reply, you repeat this message twice: 'Priority one. King's bishop, level two. Locate life forms via this signal, and beam up landing party in five minutes, mark.' Then you get back down here as fast as you safely can. Understand?"

"Perfectly," she answered.

When Spock had explained the workings of the communicator and was sure she comprehended, Calandra sat down to remove her shoes. She then assured Dr. McCoy that she was a very good climber, and Kirk mused that it was probably true when he noticed for the first time that the Fabrini have six toes on each foot, all

strongly jointed, to facilitate them in such endeavors.

"I am ready," she announced, and Kirk hoisted her onto his shoulders where she pulled herself into the hole and worked her way skyward.

The ascent was not as easy as she expected. There were numerous jagged edges along the way that tore at her flesh as she scrambled over them. Sometimes a firm handhold gave way under her grasp, and she had to grope about for another. Halfway through, she noticed that the stones began to feel slippery, and knew it was because her fingers and toes were bleeding profusely. Still she persevered, almost losing her footing at one point. It seemed to take forever to reach the summit, but finally she hauled herself out through the mouth of the chasm, and sat panting on its edge before taking out the communicator.



"How many more minutes, Mr. Chekov?" pressed Commander Scott.

"Three meenutes, fifty-seven seconds, sir."

"They're changing position," reported Sulu nervously. "It's starting to get ugly."

"Scotty! I'm picking up a distress call on an unstable frequency," exclaimed Uhura, then, taken aback, said, "It's Calandra McCoy, sir."

"Put her on!" he ordered excitedly.

"...in five minutes, mark. Repeat, priority one. King's

bishop, level two. Locate life forms via this signal, and beam up landing party in five minutes, mark."

"We ha'no' got five minutes! Lassie, do you hear me?"

"I'm just getting static now, Mr. Scott." announced Uhura.

"Keep tryin' to get through, Commander. Chekov, nail down these coordinates, and fast!"



Back on the surface, Calandra was trying to re-establish her communications after the initial signal faded. She hoped the message had been received and understood as she started back down through the hollow.



"I've got them, sir!" shouted Chekov triumphantly.

"Transporter room, Scotty barked into the intercom. "Beam up all life forms with these coordinates immediately!"

"But sir," a disembodied voice implored, "They're not all together!"

"I don't care, man! Get them up here in two trips if you have to!"

Scott whirled on Uhura. "Commander, open a channel to those trigger-happy goons. Maybe we can reason with them."

"Aye, sir."

"Enterprise," came the warning reply, "Your time is up."

Leave orbit now, or we will open fire."

"This is Commander Scott. We are in the process of beaming our people aboard. Please allow us to complete our operations, and we will comply with your demands.

"Your time is up; we have no use for tricks." The voice stopped abruptly and the Tharan warship began to veer around for an assault.

"Transporter room! Have you got them yet?"

"Three in transit, sir. Reassembling now."

"Well, get that other one up here, and hold onto your socks. We're in for it now! Evasive action, Mr. Sulu! Hard to port!" he ordered as the Tharan ship fired.

The ship lurched violently as they avoided the first blast. "Positioning for another shot at us," said Sulu tensely.

Kirk, Spock and McCoy were knocked from the transporter platform as they materialized. Kirk lunged for the control panel to assist the Chief in setting Calandra's position and pattern.

"Ship's under attack, sir," Chief Borden filled him in hastily. "Tharan warship."

"Get Dr. McCoy to sickbay, and as soon as Calandra is on board I want her on the bridge, on the double. Let's go, Spock."

The two men dashed down the corridor where they disappeared into the turbolift. They exploded onto the bridge, and immediately took their respective positions,

as though they had been there all the time.

"Transporter room!" Kirk snapped. "Is Calandra on the ship yet?"

"Yes, Captain, just now."

"Chekov, get those shields back up. Sulu, get us the hell out of the way!"

"Yes, sir!" Mr. Sulu acknowledged emphatically.

"Uhura, get me the Tharan High Command. And leave the channel to the warship open. Hurry."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Defensive posture only, Mr. Chekov. Stand by."

The Enterprise reeled again, avoiding another onslaught.

"A close one, Captain," announced Spock, taking his eyes from his console. "We eluded contact by 17.02 degrees."

"Captain, I have Tharan High Commissioner Brasi on visual," Uhura informed him.

"Put him on the screen, Commander."

Kirk stood up from his command chair, looking somewhat displaced in his torn, soiled uniform and disheveled appearance.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the United Starship Enterprise. We respectfully call a truce, so that we may discuss the situation at hand."

The Tharan Official on the viewscreen motioned to someone out

of viewer range. Behind him, Kirk heard the "swish" of the elevator doors and knew without turning that it was the Priestess.

"Request granted, for the moment. You will not be attacked. What do you want?"

These guys are just loaded with charm, Kirk thought blackly. "We have unimpeachable proof that the assassination of Governor Losyrd was perpetrated by scheming officials of both Yonadans and Therans in order to gain control of the planet Pollux 4; namely, Priest-Regent Caridor and Imperial Minister Sechack.

"What proof?" demanded Brasi, suspiciously.

Kirk took Calandra by the hand and led her in front of him. "This," he continued, "is High-Priestess Calandra of Yonada. An unsuccessful plot was launched to murder the Priestess, so that Caridor could take over, enabling the Tharan Minister to appropriate power with counterfeit charges. There are four living witnesses to the act in question, and if necessary, the Federation will declare war on Thera to protect the Yonadans."

He let the Commissioner ruminate over that on a hunch that the Therans did not want to take on the entire Federation and Star Fleet. "Let's hope they're reasonable men," Scotty vocalized.

The Commissioner gesticulated and nodded from side to side, and Kirk knew he was conferring with other delegates on some sort of intercom system. Finally, he turned back to the screen.

"It has been decided that the matter should be investigated. We

will cease all offensive action against Yonada until we have come to a conclusive settlement."

The transmission faded, and sighs of relief could be heard from all over the bridge.

"Well, I'll be damned." quipped Mr. Scott.



CAPTAIN'S LOG -- Stardate 6508.09

Following a thorough investigation, the High Command of Thera has declared a detente and has agreed to recall all colonies back to the home world.

Imperial Minister Sechack has been found guilty of high treason and awaits execution. Fittingly, Caridor was murdered by his fellow conspirators shortly after the upheaval.

The reason for that conspiracy has since come to light: after the landquake that took the life of Natira in the transport tunnels, the Yonadans consigned the aid of Theran engineers to repair it. Huge deposits of Martinak J7 were discovered, a valuable mineral used in the construction of life support systems. The discovery was hushed up by Therans such as the ambitious Sechack.

Pollux 4 has since been declared a member in good standing of New Fabrina.



"Doctor McCoy, if you don't remain in bed, I will use physical restraints." Christine Chapel's voice resounded with exasperation.

"Doctor Chapel," the Doctor spoke with thinly disguised impatience, "I am perfectly capable of declaring myself ambulatory. And if I have to lay here just one more blasted day, I'm going to go out of my mind."

He sat up tenaciously, but dizziness got the best of him and he collapsed backwards onto the cot.

"Now maybe you'll do as you're told," she derided him in her best "I told you so" manner.

He glared at her defiantly. Give 'em a caduceus and they develop delusions of grandeur, he reflected sourly.

Calandra, who was having the bandages removed from her hands and feet across the room, had been observing this exchange with amusement. "Really, Father, you must recuperate. I know you wish to return to your duties, but there is an Earth saying that you cannot carry the weight of the world on your shoulders," she mocked him, good-naturedly.

"Just whose side are you on, anyway?" he growled.

She ambled over to him, "Yours, of course, Father. Because I..." she thought a second, turning the words over in her mind, then finished, "Because I care for you."

He smiled affectionately. "You're a good kid. Just don't grow up like Chris here, pushin' everybody around." He glowered up at Chapel who returned the remark with a disdainful glance.

The Sickbay doors slid open to admit Captain Kirk and Ambassador Cassel.

"Well, now Doctor Chapel, how is our star patient today?" inquired Kirk airily, clasping his palms together.

"Just as pig-headed as usual, sir," she answered tartly.

"Why, Doctor McCoy, I'm shocked." he replied in mock astonishment, to which McCoy sourly raised an eyebrow and turned his gaze to study the wall.

"Well, Priestess," Kirk addressed her, "You will be delighted to know that New Fabrina has begun reconstruction, and will soon be on its feet, with its hands full, supervising the mining of Martinak J7."

"That is good news, Captain," she beamed.

"Yes, and not only that," added Ambassador Cassel, "But now that the civil conflict is ended, the people are clamoring for your return home. Of course, a new Confidante will have to be selected, as well as..." His voice trailed off, as a stillness fell over the entire Sickbay, with furtive glances of discomfort exchanged. Calandra dropped her eyes disconcertedly to the floor.

"Did I say something wrong?" Cassel asked, bewildered.

The Captain spoke quietly, placing his hand on the perplexed man's back. "No, Josh, it's okay. Um, come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee." He took Cassel by the arm and led him out of the room.

Kirk glanced over his shoulder once more. All they had been through these past few days had drawn Calandra and McCoy into a closer relationship, had given each something to cherish. He

wondered if that bond would be strong enough to endure a separation of this kind.



Kirk had just entered that state of mind where one is not quite asleep but dreaming nonetheless, when his doorkhime sounded, wrenching him back to reality.

"Come," he rasped, bounding out of bed to reach for a robe.

The door opened and Calandra entered uneasily.

"Captain," she spoke with urgency, "I would like you to accompany me to New Fabrina."

"I see."

"I would like to leave immediately."

"Oh. Does Dr. McCoy know about this?"

"No sir. Will you come with me?" Kirk turned to check his chronometer. It would be near dawn at the Great Hall. He turned again to face Calandra, but the child had already disappeared.



Two blinding shafts of illuminated energy flickered and dissipated as Captain Kirk and Calandra appeared in the council chambers of the Minor Powers. The room was vacant, with the single exception of one dark-haired woman who watched as they materialized.

Ailya rushed forward and she and Calandra embraced each other affectionately. "My heart sang

when I heard your voice, little one! I had feared the worse for you." said Ailya.

Calandra's eyes misted with sentiment. "I...I brought Captain Kirk," she explained to her caretaker. "I didn't want to come alone, and my...father is not yet well enough. Ailya, are you sure this is going to work?"

The tall woman dropped to one knee, clutching Calandra's shoulders. "I have presented the question before the Acolyte. It has never been done before, but it is legal. Are you certain you want this?"

Calandra nodded resolutely, swallowing convulsively. "More than anything."

Ailya's eyes twinkled warmly. "Then it will be done." She straightened, and focused her attention on Kirk. "Captain, a decision has been made."

Kirk regarded them soberly. "Abdication." he surmised.

"Yes. But in view of what's happened, our people may not accept it so willingly. Nonetheless, the Acolyte will stand behind Calandra's choice. Should there by any...trouble," she said with a nervous grin, "you must call your ship and have the Priestess and yourself taken aboard at once."

Calandra looked up to him with questioning eyes, then smiled when he winked reassuringly.

"Good," said Ailya, satisfied. "then let us go to the main auditorium. The six remaining members of the Acolyte await us, and the hall is already filled with those who have come to

hear a Major Announcement."

The crowds in the main hall fell respectfully silent at the appearance of their Priestess. In each corner of the room overhead monitors watched with impartial eyes. Calandra noticed that her mouth had gone instantly dry. Dreamlike, she made her way to the center of the platform.

"Do you remember what you are to do?" whispered Ailya.

"Yes." answered Calandra thinly.

The Repository of the Holies was brought before her, and Calandra carefully opened its lid to remove the Stone Cup. Her fingers trembled around its perimeter, threatening to spill the clear fluid that the Second Acolyte was pouring into it.

Slowly, the young Priestess raised the Cup to her lips and sipped carefully. Through a distraught haze, she saw the gratified expressions on the faces below her. The blood pounded in her ears as she looked first to Captain Kirk, then to the Acolyte, then to Ailya. In the presence of all of them, Calandra still felt very much alone. She took a deep breath, and raised the Cup above her head. With all her will and strength, Calandra hurled the ancient artifact to the floor below the dais, where it split cleanly in two with a loud CRACK.

Astonished murmurs filled the air as people looked to one another and whispered disbelief. Kirk tensed. Ailya held her breath. Calandra ran her tongue over her dry, quivering lips. "I Calandra," she began squeakily, "H..High Priestess of New Fabrina, do re...re..."

"Relinquish," Ailya prompted.

"Do relinquish my station to the ..."

"No!" "No!"

"Is this some trick? This is an outrage?"

"This has never been done!"

Outcries of opposition drowned out Calandra's words. Hopelessly, she ran to Ailya, who wrapped her arms around the child protectively.

The second Acolyte thrust his arm up to squelch the shouts of protest. "Listen to me!" he shouted authoritatively. "We of the Acolyte have sanctioned this action. You must accept the breaking of the Cup! Haven't we all learned from this tragedy that there is no room for the old ways any longer?"

"You blaspheme!"

"The old ways have kept us safe for thousands of years!"

The angry mob refused to listen, defying the resolution. The second Acolyte stiffened, giving Kirk a precarious glance.

The Captain stepped forward. "Wait a minute," he called out over the din. "If you won't listen to your leaders, then listen to this!"

At the sound of Kirk's commanding voice, the noise subsided to a low rumble. "I speak for the United Federation of Planets - a Federation that you yourselves belong to."

"You can't stand still; you move forward, or you fall behind."

He walked to where the Repository of the Holies lay, and removed a large book, holding it up before him. "This is called the Book of the People, isn't it? Who was it written for? The Priests? The Acolyte? No. It's for the people. Just as your Instruments of Obedience became obsolete, there's no longer any need for Priest-Rulers. It's time you chose your own laws, formed your own self-government for whatever is beneficial to all." He paused, allowing the gravity of his words to take effect.

"Your world," he continued slowly, "is no longer hollow. There are neighbors out there, for good or bad. You have to learn to co-exist with other worlds now."

A silence ensued for what James Kirk thought was the longest half-minute he had ever experienced. At last a very old woman hobbled forward and picked up the two broken pieces of the Cup. Then she turned and disappeared once again into the crowd.

"I accept." came a loud voice from the back of the auditorium

"I, too." came another.

Soon the room was filled with affirmative shouts and gestures.

Ailya looked at Calandra tenderly. "It's done, little one. You have performed your last duty."

Regret crossed the little girl's face. "I don't want to leave you, Ailya, but I have to. Mother is dead, and so is grandfather. But my father is alive - and he needs me."

Ailya took Calandra's hand in

her own. "And you need your father more, hmmm?" Calandra nodded brightly, and the older woman hugged her. "Then happiness is yours. Go, and don't look back, for I shall be with you - in your thoughts."

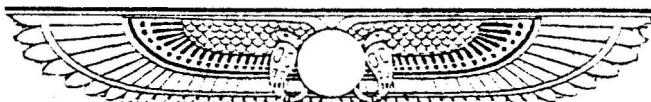
Calandra faced Captain Kirk. "What are the Terran universities like?" she asked exuberently.

"You'll have to ask your

father that one," came the fond reply.

"There are a lot of things I want to ask him," she said, "and... a lot of things I want to tell him, too."

"You'll both have about three months to say it," Kirk replied, flipping open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Two to beam up."



EROSION

by: Debbie Gilbert

Water scores away at rock,
Sculpting the land into canyons.

Entropy flows through the universe,
Slowly divesting it of vital matter.

Each loss wears away at my soul,
Laying it bare; exposed;
An echo-chamber for now-dead voices.

I live a paradox,
Offering the world more, still more,
Though inside I have nothing to give.
Colleagues, underlings - they do not suspect
A smiling face guards an empty shell.

"Life from lifelessness" -
If indeed it does exist, I must find it
Soon, before I too become
Only a remnant, a walking memory,
Roaming the corridors of sadness,
My voice but a whisper from the past.

Trinity

By: Beverly Volker

Art by: Merle Decker

Three lives so delicately intertwined
that they seem-at times-
to move and act as one

Yet, three individuals so acutely different
that one can hardly imagine how
they manage to communicate at all

A fine blending of souls
A fulfillment of destiny
A choreography of life

One - born to lead
The other two destined to follow
To confidently go forth into danger
To support, defend, reinforce
to devote their whole lives to loving him

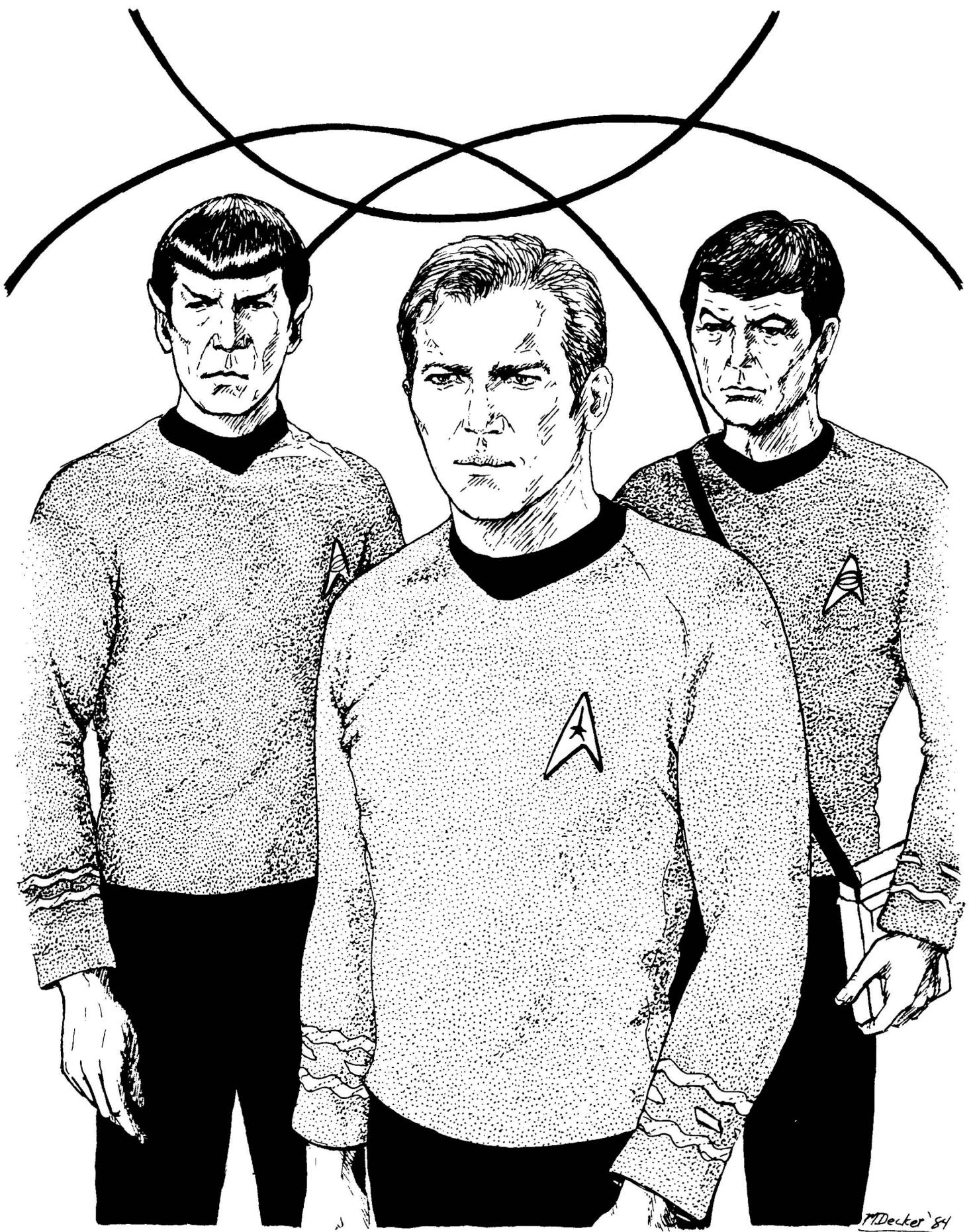
One - born to know
The other two destined to believe
To accept his knowledge with faith
Trust his wisdom without question
Relying their whole lives on his logic - and humanity

One - born to heal
The other two destined to seek out
To yield to his compassion,
His medical skills, his physician's touch
To depend, their whole lives on his God-given talent.

Three men so closely brought together
-by chance or by fate-
that it must have been written in the stars

Yet three unique beings, each with
his own strength to stand alone
or give to the others

The accomplishment of an artist
The consistency of a sunset
A lesson of love.



M. Decker '84

QUOTES

by: Lynn Syck

"Don't grieve," you said.

But you failed to
tell me how to keep from
grieving.

"The needs of the many,"
you said.

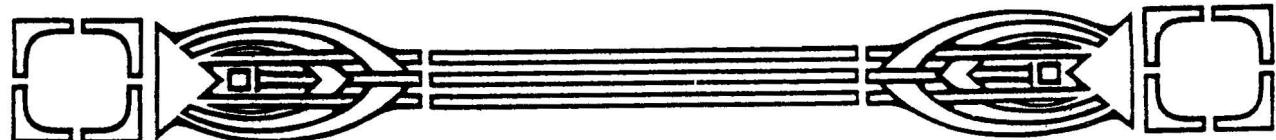
But my need for you
at my side goes on.

"What do you think of my
solution," you asked.

I detest and applaud
it, damn Vulcan logic!

"Live long and prosper,"
you said.

The years alone
stretch endlessly ahead
of me.



LAST M E L D

by:
Martha Bonds

"No."

I say the word, denying what years of training and experience damn me to accept. No lies. No hope. You are dying. And I must watch.

You struggle so. I can see the pain is bad and everything in me wants to reach through, beyond this glass, to take away your suffering with a touch. Yet I know I can't. Even if this glass were gone, my Human hands laid on you could work no miracles. I am no doctor. No Vulcan Healer. Only a man who's losing his best friend.

But you. With your hands and your mind you have saved me a dozen times over. You touched me and bore my pain. You held me and eased my sorrow. You knew my mind and helped me to forget.

I'll never forget any of our times, my friend. You gave more of yourself than any Vulcan bound to logic ever would. And more than most Humans ever could. Of all the souls I have encountered, in all my travels... Oh, God, Spock... This shouldn't be you -- but how could it be anyone else? You vowed, in your heart and for always, to protect me. I know that. To protect me and my ship and all these lives aboard. Even unto death. But death -- like this -- I want to cry, to scream, to do anything to stop this for you, for me. Yet I cannot. Must not. Your decision. Your logic. Your profound wisdom must not be questioned. Only accepted with all the graciousness we can muster.

You hand, shaking, blindly seeking the glass between us. I reach to meet it. A touch would mean so much now. No comfort for us, though. In this death we are denied even that small solace.

I only wish I could shut out the sight of your burned body. Your limbs tremble now and your eyes are ghosts, yet you clothe yourself in dignity. I see that struggle, Spock, and I see what you want me to see. A gallant stoic, ever youthful, ever strong, a gentle man of peace and science... wearing blue. Saving the galaxy with me. The two of us as we used to be... when we were young. That's the you I see now. Because I know you want me to.

Your lips speak, yet it's hard to listen. There's a buzzing in my head, a dizzying pain that blinds me for a moment. What? No, no, don't waste your tiny strength... it will cost you, cost us both too much. Ah, yes, I know. It's the only kind of touching left to us. And I don't mind the pain, if it allows our nearness.

Come. Be close. Here, in our minds, just once again. I only thought you wouldn't have the strength...

Oh God, how do you bear it, Spock? I know you're trying to tell me something, but... the pain... can't make out... words... blurred images... searing agony... love... two men together, one in blue and one in gold... and nearing death...

*"I have been
and always shall be
your friend."*

One last bright flare of radiance, a blend of incandescent pain and supreme devotion, and you are gone. I slump, comfortless and cold, my mind empty, numb. I couldn't... couldn't hear you... I'm sorry, Spock... you wanted so to have one last sharing... and so did I...

Over. Over. All over now. Death takes away and the living must move on. Yet something of my spirit leaves with you, soars out in space with your new and limitless freedom. You fly, you burn, you are a star of brilliance in my heaven, more beautiful even than the new world created out of our science and chaos. Will you reach it, find a resting place in Eden? My heart hurts too much now to even think of that. No one, not even you and I can go on cheating death forever.

I dream, toss in fitful sleep, reliving years and minutes, fighting battles in space and across a chess board. Seeing you, uniformed in gray, in scarlet... in blue.

Galloping around the galaxy is a game for the young... how many times did I repeat that line to you? Did you have to remind

me it was my birthday, Spock? Just when I was feeling my age, my dwindling usefulness and confidence? But I'm not too old for some things, it seems. Not too old for meeting death, meeting life and accepting sacrifices...

It wasn't enough that you had to give me one gift -- the antique, sentimental book was enough. We neither of us knew you'd be buying back my life and my ship, too. What a birthday gift.

I turn, burrow under my pillow, twisting away from grief and bitter tears. I should not sully your memory with contempt. We always knew it could be this way... even back when we were too young to worry about the consequences. You gave your life that I should live. Your last breath was spent that we should touch, mind to mind...

I must be dreaming still. The images are blurry, distorted by pain and need. What are you trying to tell me?

Life. It's life that's important. The needs of the many... or the one. Whether it's manufactured life, like the Genesis world, or the tiny perfection of a newborn Human. Life. From lifelessness. From death.

And you, my friend, were never more alive than when you reached out to meet your death. Never more Human than when you turned back to place one last touch upon my mind, one last echo for me to hear. You were never more loving than when you gave me this.

... the best of times, the worst of times...

When we really live, when we reach out and meet life's challenge -- and the challenge, too, of death -- we can never become old. Only the man in scarlet died. The man in blue lives on. And a captain clothed in gold stands beside him still.

Thank you Spock. I understand.

It's a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done before.

I see you watching me, Bones. Your question comes as no surprise. My answer, though, may surprise you. I hope you'll come to understand, in time.

"I feel... young."

I'm waiting, Spock. I will return to this place.

There's more to share...

OBJECTIVITY

If Spock were only here today,
I think I know just what he'd say:

You're of one species, yet you fight.
You see all things as black or white.
You cause each other untold grief.
For slight dissensions of belief.
Your sacred truths you'd violate
With bombs poised to annihilate.
If passion triumphs over mind,
We'll see the last of humankind.
Your lively culture will be lost
In one gigantic holocaust.

No wonder you inspire distaste;
We see no logic in such waste.
You tell me I've gone far enough?
Believe me, Vulcans never bluff.

Such warnings you may greet with mirth,
But there'd be no "Day After" ...

if Vulcans ruled Earth

(This poem is dedicated to Nick Meyer)

border: Caro Hedge

Debbie Gilbert

HANNIBAL'S LOGIC

by: Harriett Stallings

Art by: Lydia Moon

"Get out!!" Kirk snarled while heaving himself up from the bed. "Get out of my room, out of my life, out of my mind!!!" Each word sprayed across the semi-darkness of a typical patient's quarters.

Throwing himself forward, he shoved on his hands and uncautiously landed on his feet. The room rotated 30 degrees, then oozed downwards 45 degrees. He reached back, clutching at the headboard of the bed. "I want nothing to do with you ... do you hear me?"

An unnamed force pushed him backwards, and suddenly he was falling, stumbling, spinning sideways, bouncing from the cliffs of a nightmare and colliding with the outcroppings of ... faces ... people's faces.

"...killing me..." he whispered in awe/fear/resignation. "...killing me with their faces, with their pain, anger, shame...and their memories...nights of them, days of them...sweet memories..." He moaned once, softly, bewildered by what he felt and knew.

"...faces with no names and yet I know each soul. I know each heartbeat of them. I know the scent of their breath and the texture of each aura ... of each cell each fingertip each line..." Kirk's voice raised in the discovery of "...he's killing me with them..."

Twisting, chest down on the bed, he clutched the hem of the understanding as he clutched the edge of the sheet: a child, pleading silently with the gods of childhood monsters and dark moon nightmares. Rolling half-upright on the bed, his knees buckled and forced his weight down until he crouched. That split second pause promised safety to him, and then again he was falling backwards, careening, tumbling, spiraling and striking his body against their faces, against their agony.

Kirk landed, face down, on the floor. He spread his arms wide to grip the reality of the carpeting, then spread his legs outwards to anchor himself. Without another sound, he submitted to the demon in his mind.





Saint Max

Physician Seln waited with the patience of water eroding stone. He had been observing Lt. James Kirk recreate this phantom world for the last eighteen days. And there were still no clues as to his behavior, and more importantly, as to the cause of the madness in so normally adaptive a human.

Whatever Kirk had challenged/run against/met during a foolhardy attempt to keep the cruiser ESSEX from destruction was more powerful than any force so far explored by any terran. Kirk's actions had not saved the cruiser, and by beaming down to the dead planet ESSEX had been ordered to explore, only he and Senior Officer South had survived.

Attempting to restrain Kirk physically only increased the human's irrationality and panic. Attempting intrusion mentally was contraindicated at this point. Despite even what Star Fleet might believe of a Vulcan's mental strengths, no Vulcan would willingly meld with a mad human. It would be suicide.

Turning from the observation screen, Seln nodded to the Argarian human, serving this shift as med tech. She slipped down the corridor silently. Once more facing the screen, Seln watched her enter Kirk's room, lift him up (as one did an overly-long child) and settle him amid the sweat-soaked bedclothes.

Soothing at Kirk with her voice, Med Tech Weir, veteran of tending mind burn-out cases from Fleet, stroked the trembling human's shoulders.

"Hurts...there..." Kirk whispered out, eyes squeezed shut. He knew her, she was constant, she was reality, it meant the nightmare had ended now...for now.

"Here?" she asked, touching the side of his head. Larger than terran fingertips moving against his neck, she concentrated to ease the cable-shaped muscles.

"There..." he agreed.

His soft sigh warned Weir that he was drawing reality in, carefully.

"You have dreamt, again." she told him. "But it is over now and you are safe here."

Seln, in the monitor room, relaxed a bit. Good. Perhaps with Weir's support, Kirk could draw out this small instance of reality longer than he had yesterday.

Weir chided Kirk as he turned his head away and would not look at her. "The matter is not to be sorted out now. What is more important is to attempt to eat a light meal, and move about slowly. The tea is fresh-brewed and quite good." All the while, she coaxed at him to sit up. He moved under the constant vocal and physical encouragement, sitting up with legs dangling over the edge of the bed, fists propping himself upright.

Seln had watched, carefully, Kirk's motions. He saw the Lt. lean forward, even before Weir could. The physician's pause was only to confirm whether this was Kirk's initiation of an attack on the med staff. It was not Kirk leaned only to lay his cheek over Weir's heart. Weir, standing next to the bed, reacted slowly and subtly.

"M'too tired to eat. Don't want to sleep...don't want to move..." he muttered in dead tones.

Weir let go her own tension. Kirk's attacks were notorious, and by now so well known that few staff would work around him. For an exhausted terran, his strength was surprising - his assaults without warning. His energy had to be from the demons in his mind.

"You must try." she coaxed softly. It was not a demand of him, it was encouragement.

Weir did not move to draw him from her, but slowly lifted her arms and slid them lightly across his shoulders. Smoothing one hand to the back of his head, she supported the sagging spine and neck of the exhausted terran. "You must try...in a minute...rest a minute." she added, quietly.

Kirk nodded, willing to stay very still, now. Now, while the demons did not descend, while a serenity (which was only emptiness and the lack of fear) could let him be at peace.

Ever vigilant, Seln moved quietly down the corridor and towards the half-open door to Kirk's room. Once inside, Seln closed the door and stood in the shadows, observing. Acute Vulcan hearing measured Kirk's breathing, for this was the only warning he knew Kirk might give to the never-predictable attacks. A short intake of breath and Kirk would launch himself in maddened fury.

It did not happen. Instead came soft words, slurred by exhaustion and muffled by the fabric of Weir's tunic. "Faces..." Kirk whispered out. "Faces of strangers that live inside my soul, inside my mind. No name faces and yet they are my friends...people I know, people that have danced with me or laughed or worked with me, even taken orders from me...people...each a separate mind that I have touched and cried with or loved and touched...but I don't know them...strangers..."

"Shhh..." Weir tilted her head downwards. Kirk's weight was shifting, having been squarely against her upper torso, now eased back.

He looked up, his face white against her blue tunic, his eyes blackened by the lack of sleep and normal dreams, his cheeks clawed by his own fingernails and a new gouge at each temple.

"Don't push at the nightmares." she suggested quietly. "Take each hour as it is, each day as it will be."

"I know." he admitted the wisdom of the advice. "But if I could puzzle this out...my mind stumbles...I can't even remember my own name sometimes."

Seln spoke, giving away his presence in the room. "You are James Kirk, Lt. S.G. Your ship assignment was the cruiser ESSEX, lost in an as yet unexplained incident seven terran months ago." As he crossed the room, Seln noted that Kirk listened, but did not tense or try to sit upright. A human male should have reacted to being observed in such a weak state by another male. Kirk should have moved in some manner that restated identity and a certain dignity all terran males felt compelled to state. Kirk only stayed quiet, still, as if absorbing words.

"You have encountered some unknown force on a planet considered a dead world, on the outer perimeter of the Mareluis Binary system. Your ship was sent to investigate energy emissions of unknown source and classification. At that time, the ESSEX began experiencing difficulty in maintaining orbit around the planet. Communications were negated for an unknown reason and those of your landing party were either killed or maddened. Of that landing party, only you and South remain alive." Seln positioned himself next to the human, in case of violent reaction to the reality now spoken, then sat down slowly on the bed.

Weir did not move, save to continue the motions of soothing. But Kirk's expression changed, confusion blanking the peace in his features.

"Have you questions?" the Vulcan Seln finally asked in the long silence.

"No. I believe what you say." Kirk said, in a wooden tone of defeat.

"Excellent." Seln decided. That was the first step from denying what had happened to accepting the facts and remembering.

Seln then chose to add one more fact into Kirk's memory. "By the time a Fleet cruiser could answer call of distress from the ESSEX, she was destroyed and the landing party was scattered across the southernmost hemisphere. Only you and South remained at the last reported location. Only you and South survived transport to this med center, Base Nine."

Kirk actually nodded. Seln could not see the motion clearly, but Weir could feel it.

Seln did not press further at Kirk's mental state or memory, but stood up.

"Lunch, and fresh tea." Weir said, as Seln moved toward the door.

Both Vulcan and Argarian heard a defiant "I hate tea. I'm used to drinking coffee."

Weir did not react outwardly. Good. she thought *Make those choices. Savor these minutes Kirk. Savor them and remember them the reality of the reality.*

Seln walked down the hallway, checking on South's condition. South had only kept sanity for spare moments after being beamed aboard the rescue ship. He was now on total life support, which assisted only because South

subliminally complied with that assistance. Should he, in his unnameable madness, defy that assistance, no one could force him to live. And if Master T'Luin did not arrive before that point of choice, it would be a wasted life.



Lt. Spock studied the image before him, looking for a missed detail, a minor flaw in data records, an omission of some seemingly irrelevant fact. He could find none.

Yesterday, second shift, his promotion and reassignment to the cruiser ENTERPRISE had been beamed in, and now, fifteen days from that reassignment, he was given one last puzzle to solve. He did not regret that sudden duty, he did not regret leaving the corvair HANNIBAL. Thus far in his well planned career, he had moved from ship to ship, gained his promotions and solved sudden puzzles often.

Below the HANNIBAL lay a dead world. Its only life and purpose would seem to be to create navigational hazard in this particular quadrant. It was a world of unmistakable frozen death, with no artifact nor history known. Its airless and unremarkable face held no clue as to its powers and reported energy emissions.

HANNIBAL had achieved a cautious, distant orbit, scanning and recording a great deal of nothing. Spock had learned why HANNIBAL was given such unsolvable problems to clear up. As the best corvair/research vessel in Fleet to date, she had a reputation unequaled elsewhere. If the crew and the equipment on this ship could not find answers, those answers were likely to remain unknown for a long time to come.

Such musings did not get duty done however. The sound of the intercom reminded him to focus on duty. He waited for his roommate to answer her 'com call from her side of the room. When Travers did not, merely turned over in her sleep and ignored it, Spock relayed the call to his desk unit.

"Yes, Spock here."

Lansing was a bit surprised. He had thought Spock to be in the labs. He had called Travers first, to give her a chance at the data. Oh well, she wasn't missing anything anyway. "I've got the data back from Base Nine." Lansing smoothed his tones in reaction to the irritation he had heard in Spock's voice. "But it's on a personnel file so you'll have to come to the Med Bays Office to take a look."

"On my way..." Spock flipped the com unit off, grabbed up the review tapes on the planet and moved the search for the answers down the hall.



"I thought you'd be interested." Lansing leaned over Spock's shoulder, tapping a data line on the reader screen. "See? His name is South, he was in the landing party with Kirk and four security guards. He stayed sane, and if

he can just get sane again..." Lansing ignored the dark look on Spock's face. Spock was defensive of anything Vulcan, but especially the rep a Vulcan mind had. "We can then move this little puzzle back to him." Lansing summed up.

Spock shook his head no (a thoroughly human habit he had picked up) and tapped an index finger on the screen.

"Doubtful." He pointed to the line of data detailing South's physical status. "At any time, South can and quite possibly will defy the life support. Since his abilities include autonomic function controls, he will simply shut down his own body."

Lansing noted matter of factly "Being mad, he wouldn't know that it's suicide. I'd say he's running away from something, like Lt. Kirk is..."

"A supposition at best, Doctor." Spock replied.

"Otherwise," Lansing continued, ignoring Spock's view of things, "Kirk is another matter. His EEGs are unscrambling and he's finally starting to listen...which means whatever happened to him on that planet can be conquered, with time."

To Spock, Kirk's medical status underscored that assumption. Indeed, the human was certainly (by indications in the records) fighting back, but could lose the battle from sheer physical exhaustion. That Healer Seln was the physician in charge, said much of Kirk's mental status.

Since Spock could not copy the report, (it was a one time 'look and destroy' record) he stayed at the desk viewer, picking apart the few new bits of info. As a student of humans, having worked well with them for years now, he could place a personality profile on Kirk with some assurity. Intelligent, ambitious, talented and confident, Kirk was also a mind that did not accept defeat easily, readily, or for any second past what insanity demanded of him to accept.

And in that, Spock knew lay some form of answer.



As lucidity lingered for increasingly longer periods of time, Kirk began to ask more and more about how South was. When such questions became almost a greeting to every person walking into Kirk's room, Seln risked that first visual encounter with truth.

Kirk felt his knees shaking. Weir was walking along with him, but he sidled closer to the corridor wall in an attempt to get to South's room on his own feet. Last night his dreams had been increasingly graphic. And the last stone he crashed into in that nightmare was definitely South's face. In fact, South's face was the only one he could say as familiar, the other faces were still strangers. A curious fact was that even Seln and Weir, people whose faces were clear in his mind, did not appear in the nightmares at all.

By dint of will and Weir's arm around his waist, Kirk made it to the chair in South's room. He half fell into the seat and immediately searched the prone figure for some clue of alertness. "Can he hear me?"

"Doubtful." Seln said, standing directly behind Kirk. Weir was near the foot of the bed, and seemed to be waiting for something, also.

"I'd like to talk to him anyway." Kirk decided, not sure of what he would say to the comatose Vulcan. He had not really known South, save as a superior officer and scientist.

From the long visual appraisal of South, one thought did wedge in Kirk's mind like a thorn: He had become dependent on South. How or when or why, he did not know. The eagle-featured, cold and often curt Vulcan was somehow far different in Kirk's mind than the two years of working with him said he was.

"I'd like to talk to him, alone please." Kirk asked.

Seln answered immediately. "No, Lieutenant."

"You don't trust me with him." Kirk accused quickly. Again, the razor humiliation slit his mind, as with every time he realized how little he could be trusted.

Seln seemed to pick the word out of his mind. "I do not trust past a certain point. This you know. That is no reflection on your identity nor a point of indignity and inferiority, Lt." Seln paused, to let that fact sift into Kirk's brain. "Consider that South is totally incapable of movement or decision, and must also be protected, as you must."

"From me...myself..." a bitter bile rose in Kirk's throat.

"Yes." Seln confirmed, seeing no reason to couch fact in deluding terms, thus possibly deluding Kirk into believing his status was far more improved than it actually was. By honesty, honest appraisal of oneself could be formed. In this case, understanding was based solely on Kirk's true appraisal of himself. Diplomacy was best left to mediation of peace treaties.

"South..." Kirk said almost shyly. Hearing his own lack of firmness and certainty, he raised his voice. "South. I know you can hear me, even if the experts don't think so. All right. So what do I know about Vulcans, anyway? Not a whole lot, I can tell you. But I know you. And experts are the easiest to fool."

He sighed, leaning forward slowly (so Seln and Weir would know he wasn't going to attack South as he lay there), "You look like hell, South. You look like my mind feels right now. And you can't be all that peaceful, you must be lost too, just like I am."

Of course, South did not respond in any way, not the merest altering of a monitor or graph line.

"Your's is the only face I recognize in my nightmares, and it's getting clearer each time. You're the last face I collide with and then I always wake up. Now I'm beginning to associate you with waking up, with reality. I was hoping you were waking up too, so I could ask you what happened."

Kirk forgot that anyone was even in the room, save he and South. "You know..." he accused the silent figure, "you know what happened to us. You're Vulcan...and strong in your mind. You're a real bastard to deal with on duty, but dammit! you gave me a reason to hang on."

Again Kirk fell silent. So strange it was, as long as he talked to South, at South, he was sure of what he was saying. "That's all I know. You've done something South...did something, said something, made something stop or start or clear up or dim. Only you know what you did and I don't. All I know is that I depended on you and, for us both, you did whatever you did to make us last until the ship got there..."

Frustration, anger, agony rampages of madness, all of it loomed large in Kirk's mind, threatening to overwhelm these small and thin truths he was finding. "South! What was it? Why am I like this? Why are you like that? No one on the ESSEX can tell either of us. They're all dead...I don't remember that, Seln keeps drilling it into me...hour after hour...the ESSEX is gone and we survived...because he says that's reality..."

Kirk dragged in a shaking breath at the cold fact, as if ice water had been thrown on him. "Why is your face last and why are you locked up inside yourself now?"

His voice raised, the hard edge of anger hammering the cutting edge of fear. "Stop being such a coward! Answer me!! What did you see? What happened to us? ... to the landing party? ... to the crew? ... to the ship? What did we see, South? What did we do? Did we cause all this to happen?"

Seln interposed his hand between Kirk's hand and South's. "We will leave now." he demanded quietly. "You have seen for yourself South will not respond."

As Kirk was bodily escorted towards the door, he twisted to glare at South. There was no motion in South, no open eyes, no words, no answers, only the steady tone of monitors and the inhalation/exhalation of a respirator. Rage billowed up before Kirk's eyes, the green/yellow/brown of it clouded his vision as it evolved into a red smear.

Suddenly, Weir was pinning him to the hall floor and Seln was grabbing at his face. "James Kirk." Seln demanded. The rage faded. Kirk's robe was torn, his hands relaxed from fists, knuckles cut and bleeding. Weir was cursing softly, in her own colony's dialect.

Kirk waited for the hypo, but it didn't come. He had never been sedated and he stopped expecting they ever would. He might slip into his mind and retreat, like South.

"He knows..." Kirk suddenly accused, looking directly into the Vulcan physician's eyes. "And you let him hide. You won't let me hide ... sometimes I want to ... just curl up and die ... get it over with ... just curl up like

South. He's quiet, peaceful ... he doesn't even know he's here. Maybe he's back there on the planet, maybe he's even really dead and can't defy your machines. Maybe you've got a corpse in there!" As Kirk's voice rose to a shout, Weir tightened her grip on his hips and shoulders. "And you ... experts are so stupid you don't even know it!"

All of what Kirk feared came forward, words pushing out of his mouth in a torrent. "Maybe his brain is really dead...his mind...his soul and I'm dead too and this is hell...no I'm not dead and this is hell...I'm the only one left and I can't live like this..." Panic twisted Kirk's guts, he dry heaved in reaction.

Twisting his head, he searched above him, fought to focus, to calm. The dreams were always stronger after the violence came and swept him away.

Something began to tear into his mind. Round and 'round it went like a crazed animal, like the maddened thing he had become. Struggling with the tons of weight smothering him, he screamed out "Sedate me...NOW!!"

Seln lifted Kirk's head, his hands searching calmly. The human had stiffened as if in great pain, and the Vulcan feared a series of convulsions. As Seln started to move Kirk to his back, the human relaxed utterly exhausted.

Kirk knew how senseless it was to fight Seln and Weir. Had he not fought them long enough, often enough? They would not sedate him so he could sleep. They feared he would retreat like South. Suddenly that maddened fact was sanity. There was another way to end hell than drugs. *if you can't fight it, join it!* Follow the careening, crashing-gut-spilling-over the cliff edge-nightmare to the end, greet the demon at the toe to toe space and kill or be killed.

Kirk's total slump worried Weir. She drew back cautiously as Seln lifted the human from the floor. "Weir, have your facial injury attended." Seln ordered.

She nodded, and as she turned, defeat stung her mind. It had been a calculated risk to let Kirk see South ... and Kirk had just lost ... maybe forever lost.



Spock bore up under Lansing's jibes and comments, (all of which were less than helpful) with disappearing patience. Finally, he fixed his stare not on the screen, but on Lansing instead.

Lansing, knowing that stare, sighed. "Spock, there are no answers here. You win some and you lose some. Maybe you're looking down the wrong trail. Maybe these records were a mistake and haven't got any info. Let's go back to step one, with the physics people..." Lansing reached, underlining his point by turning off the viewer.

Spock read that act very well. Lansing was deciding to give up and put the personnel records in an erase mode. He slyly lifted the tape from the viewer.

"There are always answers, Doctor. My task is and has always been to find them."

It worked. Spock got to his quarters with the personnel tape intact. Unbelievable, insult and superiority, indeed even arrogance, did have its positive uses.

Determined that there were answers hidden in that tape, Spock sat back down at his desk, again staring at the data. Travers gave the hybrid a pained look. "We're getting the go-ahead to transmit all data and leave here ... five days late for shore leave, as usual ..."

Getting no reaction, Travers leaned, hand on the edge of Spock's desk. She studied his careful ignoring of her. She'd put up with worse, as cabinmates went, and this one-time-human-then-again-vulcan was a real challenge to get along with. She could now, after three years with Spock, qualify as an expert in difficult personalities. Bunking with a Tellurite would be like living with a buddy now.

"Sometimes, Spock, you show wide streaks of sheer human stubbornness. Enough to choke a horse." Travers accused, getting the cold-eyed-stare to focus on her, not the viewer. "When you get to the ENTERPRISE, better ask for your own cabin, if possible. Like as not, there aren't many humans who can deal with your brand of work."

She straightened. "And give up the almighty search. From what I know of this, if HANNIBAL can't get the elephants over the mountain, then the mountains just can't be gotten over!"

Spock watched her shove tapes into her carryall and storm out the door. *If Hannibal can't get over the mountains, then perhaps they are not mountains at all.* He answered her, with a musing thought.

And suddenly sat upright, no longer tired. *Hannibal would believe he was attempting to cross mountains with elephants, if he believed only what he saw. To most humans, fact is based on sensory input. But what appears as elephants, or mountains may in fact be ants and valleys.*

He frowned, letting the unraveled logic tangle, untangle, then find a spindle of its own to wrap around. *What appears as energy, may be lack of energy. What appears as madness might be called sanity...if...if one develops the same status as the maddened one. By achieving a mad state, insanity is its own mirror image.*

Of course, the data would mean little. The actions of both South and Kirk were not sane, tho' recorded by sane minds. The closest state of madness could be a controlled retreat into the mind.

Spock immediately signaled the Captain, explaining two options. She was not thrilled with the idea of him duplicating any landing party scenario and was not about to court the destruction of her ship.

Thus, as Spock suspected she might, Captain Heller chose the second option. She agreed that Spock could file his report immediately, with addendas to be completed on the way to Base Three and his transfer to the

ENTERPRISE. His other work was already completed, thus he was free to lock away inside himself and explore that mountain/valley -- sanity/madness. With the help of Doctor Lansing, of course, in a controlled environment and under observation. If there was one thing Spock had learned for his duty aboard the HANNIBAL, it was never to eliminate the illogic and attempt solutions only by the orthodox.



Dr. Lansing shook his head no, with no intention of tolerating an argument. Spock had returned the personnel tape he had so slickly lifted earlier, and now had the most preposterous trail mapped out for getting answers.

"Then, I will explore the possibilities on my own." Spock said, in a tone of finality that Lansing could not ignore.

"You're courting 'crazy' and want me to abet the trip?" Lansing demanded, while images of a crazed Vulcan on a locked ship rampaged through his mind.

"I was requesting that I be sedated and monitored, simply that. If, in fourteen hours, I am not alert, the drug mysosopholian will sufficiently irritate my digestive tract to force my awareness back to my own body." Spock dragged in a calm and stoic breath. "Thus I will be drawn back from any trance."

Lansing was not impressed with any long-winded Vulcan. "Sure! I'm going to strap you down, sedate you, then give you a hypo of ginger and beer loaded with virus...in effect, give you the screamin' trots for a month, just so you..." his voice began to drip scorn "...just so you can go trippin' off in your head for awhile?"

"It is not ginger and beer." Spock grabbed the chance to speak before Lansing got 'wound-up', as the humans termed it. "It is a herbal-based compound of spices made from terran plants, which I have a definite allergy to. As for the 'screamin trots', I can assure you I will wake long before then."

"You're rowing with one oar here." Lansing snarled. "You've got a streak of self-abuse a whipcracker would adore!! And that's going to get you in a lot of trouble one of these days. You mark my words, Spock."

Spock easily ignored Lansing's insults, for when Lansing insulted, he was, in actuality, acquiescing. "Your choice, Doctor."

"Sonabitchin' logic! This is logic?" Lansing cursed, muttered and threw Spock filthy looks. But with his back to the wall, he still began preparing the hypo.



Kirk continued to spiral. He had crushed a jaw on South's face and now was in an almost free fall. It was the most sickening, terror-filled free fall in his life. The determination to face-off with what lay at the end of this dream was the weight that kept him falling.

South's face had changed during each dream. The features were so young now, boyish, pale and thin. The eyes were closed and there was a claw mark through one brow to the bridge of that almost-Roman, Vulcan nose of his.

And Kirk noticed that if he focused on South, he started to float. He was weary, and, therefore floating seemed comforting. But he also wanted to know - had to know - the answers. This was the only way to know. That was all that could be called lucidity in his aching mind. Once more, he forced the determination forward (the one that was a stone in his belly, weighing him down.)

The ground neared, littered with the grotesque leavings of faces he had chipped from the cliff above him. There were images of things in his younger life - it was a graveyard, a final place for all that he had ever felt and feared. It even stank of the sweat and fear, and the blood smell of iron and copper. It was colder, and almost slimy, now.

Kirk focused, letting the carnage of nightmares slide around inside his vision, looking for something he did not know and could not recognize. The stone in his belly, that awesome determination pushed him downwards, and then he would catch a glimpse of South's face and rocket upwards to the cliffs. Again he would focus on the stone and tumble downwards.

Now, after eons, his whole body began to sag, not onto the ground, but through it. He was being smothered by the membrane it had become, made up of all the ugliness in him, in his life, and in other people ... people he didn't even know. He was being coated with it, becoming a monster, instead.

And he could only hang onto the stone in his belly. The membrane seemed to sag, and his face burst through it with a rush of cold and remnants. He seemed to breathe then. He seemed to actively suck air into his liquid filled lungs, and it felt right to do so.

His shoulders were bunched, his feet poked, shoved through the membrane with his knees and then with his hands. Suddenly it gave way. He felt himself screaming as he fell. He felt himself impacting in an utter darkness that held only one thin spiraling light. The light seemed to wind about his body, like a spider's thread; catching him, snapping him up short, tearing at his organs with the force of being halted so brutally.

That stone of determination he had so long ago swallowed had dissolved in the fall. Now, only a tiny sharp shard of it remained in his guts. There was nothing in existence but the strand cocooning him. There was no sense of direction his mind could focus on ... no horizon. He was totally lost, captured and simply held in this place. It was neither cold nor warm. It's void smelled of nothing, not even the scent of his own body. No sound of heartbeat, that sound that had kept him sure he still lived, no sound of breathing, (and he did not know the sense of filling his lungs either). Nothingness, save the strand, the shard of stone and him.

Was this then the end of the dream then? How could it be? It had no beginning, no closeness to the membrane he had fallen through, and it had no ending. No sides, or top, or bottom, or dimension. NO, it could not be the end, but here he could be caught forever. It was not what he had courted when opening himself to the nightmare, it was not the answer he would face off.

The stone in his belly again grew, and like a braided rope the strand cocooning him began to break, soundlessly. The stone grew and grew and he weighed more and more and more. Tons of him dangled, and the fear of falling free was so suddenly overwhelming he again screamed in terror. And the rope began to sing out as it rewound its shreds to hold him again, firmly.

Again he was determined and made the stone in him grow. Again the strand unraveled and again the fear filled him. Again he screamed in terror. Again the strands sang out, rewrapping around him and again the stone grew in him and again the fear and again

And with each time, through the eon of it all, the strand was less strong and the fear was less strong and his exhaustion was just another weight inside him.

As the exhaustion grew like another stone and he fell mutely, the strand fell with him, stopping short - not long enough to keep him company on his journey. Finally he was alone as he spiraled in all directions, not falling, not moving.

Slowly there evolved a light to the dark; a baregrey just like the strand as it had unwrapped. He strained to know, to recognize and to move - he must move toward the grey now. He could then sense that, inexorably, he was moving.

Not forward, not backward, not up or down or sideways or fast or slow or even moving at all, merely progressing. Progressing towards the sudden small tornado that revolved so slowly close to him. The funnel was made of a million billion sparks, like nothing he had ever known, burning brightly yet never burning him in the writhing of its form. He progressed into the funnel, (and tho' not hot or cold or up or down) he simply knew and designated this 'funnel', this spark, as a shape cohesive and whole. Then, suddenly, he was in the center of it all.

The stones in his belly now kept him there. The center of what he was in was called "time". He called it time though he had no concept of it, either in passing or in lacking. He simply knew that this should be called "time".

As he rested there, the exhaustion began to lighten, but the determination began to weigh even more. "Time" spun around him in the sole purpose of its own existence.

He waited, locked in the center of this concept called time. He could now sense an echoing inside himself, (tho' he was neither inside nor outside himself at all). Something akin to him, he could call it akin to him, was echoing deep inside him. Some of the sparks were gone and in their places, a darkness that took form against the eon spinning funnel.

"James," the echo named him. "James."

He pushed his 'senses' forward and focused on this new addition to the funnel. Was it the funnel itself? Was it 'time's own voice?

"Jimmy?" It called to him.

"James T. Kirk." It defined in a different voice.

"Jim?" It pleaded again.

"Mr. Kirk." The strongest voice suddenly forced against him.

Demanding now, a duet of voices, chaotic and almost screaming at him. His name, each was his name and each name was a memory that he did know.

The cacophony halted. Silence. And then again, "James." This voice seemed to know him.

And he looked about in 'time', searching each small spark in the funnel. He could not see, and he stayed in the center as he looked inside/outside each spark.

"James. Forgive me." Like the voice of total mourning.

He knew the voice. Remembering it took nothing from the weight in him, but it did not add to the eternity of it, either.

"James, leave here," it said. "Time has been disrupted." The voice was South's, and as Kirk fit that sense into him, it became South's shadow.

"James, we disrupt time, almost beyond repair." The second voice was not South's. A stranger's voice. Why was it younger, a blend of age and tenderness?

"What time? Where? Are you really here? With me?" Kirk was not able to truly speak. His mouth moved, he could feel the sparks enter through his parted lips.

It was dangerous to speak. If he took time into himself, he might destroy it ... or himself and/or South and the stranger.

"Leave. We must leave." Both voices commanded him.

"I don't understand. Answer me! I came here for answers. I came here to be answered! Answer me...answer me..." Kirk's mind began a wail in the cold desperation of having come this close, this far.

The younger voice shouted at him. Ordering him, demanding him, shoving at him with words until he thought that it would kill him with cruel sharp syllables.

"Leave here!" It pushed into his mind. Demanded "Leave here!"

He tried to cling to the voice and not the funnel. Not South, this stranger's voice was sane and clear as well as young and strong.

But the effort to grip the voice was destroying him. The stone in his belly was gone and his determination was shattered apart; a thousand shards that swept through the shadows, through the funnel. Once again the strand wound him up; a spider's feast, tugging/straining-sometimes-unraveling, it pulled him up again to the grey.

"No..." he whimpered, struggling to make the strands let him loose.

"I know, I know now..." he began to scream out in his mind. "Let me go back...let me go back...let me go...let me...let..." What powered his sheer terror was the loss of the voice not South's inside him. He must find and fix on that voice of sanity, of reason that had spoken of knowing the answers.

His cries fisted his own ears. Blow after blow, sharper and sharper as he was raised up by his terror, through the membrane. Suddenly no strand, suddenly South's face. Part of it shattered away, part of it a stranger's face, a different one, a Vulcan and not a Vulcan. But as he tried to focus, to puzzle this out, as the terror left him in the waves of wanting to know, he was lifted, shoved upwards. As if in the updraft of a thunder storm, he plunged upwards and could not fight the force of it. Giving in, relaxing, he prayed and shouted to be taken back to where he 'knew'.

And there was grey again and he focused. And as yet he screamed and tried to understand what he knew, what had happened.

Weir clamped a hand down on his jaw, while shouting through his outcries. "Kirk! James Kirk!" His eyes flew open, staring sightlessly.



Master T'Luin opened her eyes, searching South's haggard features, face still clamped in her hands. Pulling in far deeper breaths, she steadied herself to the vision of his open, staring eyes.

Backing from his confusion, she demanded "South. It is time."

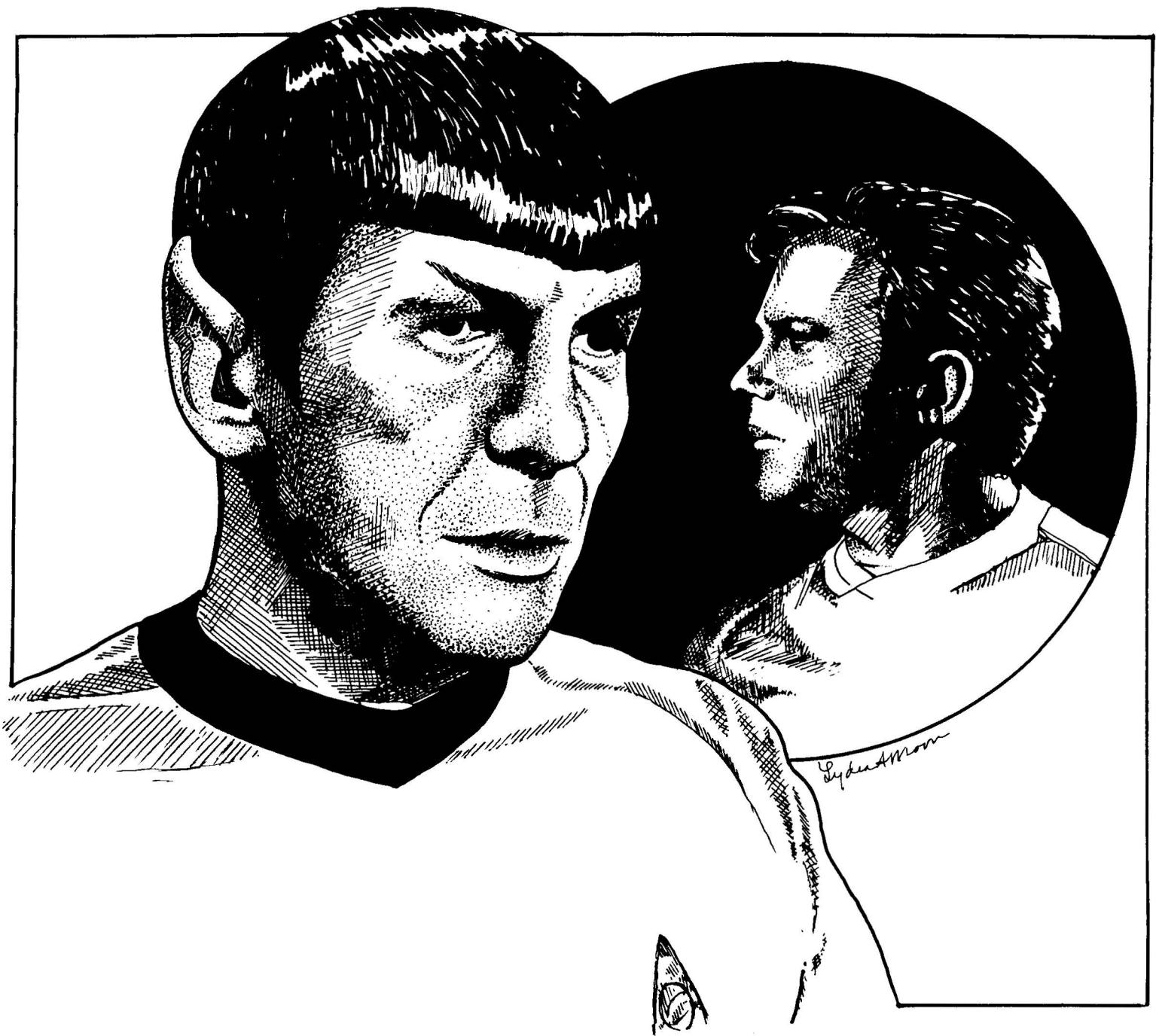
"Time." He forced a long silent throat to react. "A vortex of time..."

"Yes." she confirmed.



"A manner by which time focuses..." Spock thought, and opened his eyes.

Lansing was calling him a 'sonofabitch' and threatening that there had better have been some answers found. Lansing looked pale, frightened.



"Time..." Spock said, voice cracking.

"Time...yeh...It's 0500 and you've just scared the living hell outta me..." Lansing straightened from his back breaking stoop over the prone Vulcan.

"The planet was a time structure. It is not a planet...the mountain...Lansing, was neither a mountain nor a valley nor energy nor even a physical existence at all..."

"Great...!" Lansing eyed him. "You're babbling like a drunk, mister."

"I am sober, believe me." Spock glanced at the hypo. "Did you bring me forward? I have no memory of physical distress demanding my consciousness to turn attention to my body."

"I was just about to," Lansing replied, while removing the restraints from the Vulcan. "You've been screaming and talking pure gibberish in what I suppose is your language for about four hours now..." He paused, scaling vision against the monitors as the Vulcan sat up, quite shaky. "How do you feel?"

"Tired."



"Tired." Kirk answered Seln. "Confused about what I know, what I saw and what I can believe in. All I know is the faces. I'll probably never understand it all. Those faces were future/past/present and I can't explain that either."

"I remember..." Kirk continued heavily "...hearing South's voice, seeing another Vulcan's shadow, seeing a Vulcan woman's face..." he frowned, unsure now. All of them Vulcan? "...And a stranger there too, in time. There and not there, was and was not. But him...he...his voice was there, leading, taunting...human/inhuman Vulcan/nonVulcan..." He gave up trying to center his memory of the stranger.

Seln sat down, in a fatigued fashion, having clearly decided something. "T'Luin will explain to me and I will interpret and explain to you what she and South have determined this madness was."

Kirk nodded, that was something he wanted to know more than anything else.

Seln continued. "From what can be deduced without meditation on the matter, the planet appears to have been some form of focus for time, but only that it cannot be called a time gate, merely merging time. Do you understand?"

"Some." Kirk did not expect to understand much of it. "Am I sane, now?"

"You have progressed to that state, yes. However, there are many days ahead before you will achieve more than mental stability, but an ability to trust yourself as well."

There was that word again, 'trust'. "What about South?" Kirk shelved the word. "Is he still mad?"

"Hardly. As I have said..."

"Yeh." Kirk interrupted. "He and T'Luin will meditate ... ghod I'm tired..."

"There is reason. You have, for the last four hours, been quite violent. An inner battle, obviously." Seln offered.

Kirk shut his eyes. Why did it sound so good to hear he had a reason? He knew it was going to take weeks to build back his strength and to get over the nightmares. It would take years to understand all this. He wanted to know, he needed to understand. He knew only two things: South's voice ("James. Forgive me.") which had been a prelude to a joining of minds on the planet. The intrusion had been unbearable.

And he knew that time was not as anyone thought it to be. It was not well measured, but erratic. Time just drifted in the vastness of its own self, confined by its own perimeters, formed only by itself in so endless a void. Like the universe, exactly like it.

All he could capture in his mind was the memory of a woman's face and the stranger's voice. And the odds of being in a place where time was going its own way could not be counted. As for the ESSEX? Time was physical only in the relative sense of acting on itself, thus acting on physical matter in a most chaotic way if at all. And ESSEX - her crew, had never been found aboard the hulk, only the hull remained in its twisted wreckage of time. But time could also bless as well as destroy. For Kirk knew the blessing of time to heal, now.



Spock read the missive from Base Nine. Both Kirk and South would recover. His own suppositions had been confirmed, but his own exploration of the mystery had possibly cost time itself, and those involved much in the way of stress and strain.

Seln had a strong warning for him in the missive. Spock, as a Vulcan supposedly trained in the disciplines, knew not to indulge his curiosity when it would involve the intrusion in another's right to privacy. Spock had committed a serious breech of ethics, according to Seln.

And the Healer had also reminded Spock that he had been warned before this incident. His hybrid status made many of his mental skills erratic and their truer nature had never been completely known. Such skills in Spock masked as human skills, and then as Vulcan skills. It was best, then, to seek answers in a more orthodox manner.

The closing of the communique informed him that, at his convenience, Master T'Luin would speak with him on the matter. Until then, further thought and especially further meditation and exploration of the subject would be best set aside. Without a Master as guide, it was courting suicide to further explore those realms.



South was being sent home. Kirk did not bother to ask if he could see the Vulcan before then. They would all say no. This last week, he had absorbed more of what had happened to him. And his dreams were now normal nightmares. The very thought that he had 'normal' nightmares struck a wry sense, and a far deeper sense of relief in him.

He told Seln "To see that far into the future is madness, itself."

Seln agreed to that summation, but again warned, "Those faces you remember may or may not be in your future. Time has been disrupted around you by those participating in the exploration of the ... event."

"It's okay. As you say, the human mind has a stopgap measure against insanity. I'm already forgetting the faces, I can't even remember why it terrified me. Except that it was like knowing too much, far too much and not wanting to know it."

"Indeed, the human mind does not erase what it knows, but merely fades that knowing until, if ever, the knowledge is truly needed again."

"I think I like that." Kirk agreed. "In fact, being human has its advantages. I'm human, I can forget. South can't."

"Being Vulcan has its advantages also, Lt. Kirk." Seln returned, while standing to leave. "If not capable of forgetting, South will be highly capable of putting to use what he understands of this."

"In theory." Kirk decided. "It can't be proven about time, except what every madman knows about it."

"Correct." Seln nodded, opened the door and was gone.

Kirk slipped back the covers. The night shift was on duty and he had made a habit of padding down the hallway for a 'walk' at this hour. He slipped on a robe, walked past the nurses station and to the visiting room. Once he knew they had seen him go watch out the window awhile, he waited. Sure enough, they went back to their idle talk on duty.

Now he was again trusted. That was wry for what he now planned. But, he trusted himself again. That was the value of a human.

He rapped on South's door, and as the Vulcan said 'come', he slipped slyly into the room.

Crossing, finding a chair, he sat down. The light was on low. South looked like his demons still mauled him up good, when he slept. "You okay, South?"

"I am healing." Came a stiff reply. "And finding answers." South would not look at him.

Kirk rethought this intrusion and started to stand. "I'm glad."

"James." The word, exactly spoken as in Kirk's memory. "Forgive me." South stared at the ceiling as he spoke. "The intrusion was totally ..."

"You saved my life. Between us, we had enough sanity to hang on..." Kirk interrupted.

South simply continued with "Against what is a Vulcan truth of the right of each mind to exist as a whole and separate entity..."

Kirk sighed. If he had to wait all this out, so be it.

"Thus, I ask illogically, forgiveness for the unforgiveable." South ended a rather lengthy, humiliating to him, statement.

"Alright." Kirk agreed. "I forgive you if, in return, you accept my thanks for my being able to sit here, sane and getting better at trusting me."

"Forgiveness is not conditional." South reproached Kirk.

"Alright, without condition. I told you, if it takes words like forgiveness, you've got it." Kirk paused, as the dark eyes in so haggard a face settled on him.

"Now, you will be well-mannered and listen to me." Kirk decided. South did not respond, but kept Kirk's gaze.

"I've already gotten a lot cleared up, and forgotten a lot too. Some facts stick in my mind because Seln kept telling me them, other facts because every time I wake up, I simply know them." Kirk did not expect South to know or even approve his way of dealing with memory, but it did not faze him. He had come here to say other things too.

"On the planet..." Kirk paused, it was difficult to phrase this right. "If you'd taken even ten seconds to ask me to join minds, I would have already been mad enough that you couldn't have trusted the answer. I am grateful to you for adding your resources to mine. We survived. I don't think I feel intruded on, and I don't think you know any more about me than before we ran into time."

To this, South nodded. "Soo..." Kirk again paused. "Going home or sticking around for a reassignment?"

"I believe I will refuse the assignment to the ENTERPRISE. My place seems to be at home now. There, I can formulate theories on the objective level of time. With T'Luin's cooperation and assistance, this group of theories can be explored as it is referenced in the physical and metaphysical sense..."

"Whoa!" Kirk shook his head no. "Don't bother to try to explain it." He held South's gaze. "Is that what you want to do?"

South gave him the same old look of 'you're prying, human.' and Kirk gave him a human's wolf grin.

"It's been interesting, South." Kirk said and stood up. "If you ever get the concepts into words that a human can understand, I'll be interested to read them..."

"I will remember to inform you, if and when such a report can be formulated and then translated into a non scientific and nonVulcan concept of logic..." South retorted, quietly.

In the awkward silence of a semi-insult given less than seriously, Kirk again studied South. "I'm not supposed to be here, so I had best leave." Kirk turned to go.

"That has never stopped you, before this." South jabbed in a tired, but Vulcan manner.

"The next ship I'm assigned to probably won't have any Vulcans on it. I'll miss that smart-assed superior attitude of yours, South." Kirk shot back, not bothering to turn around and look at South. Shutting the door quietly behind him, the human slunk back down the hallway.



Spock settled into his new duties aboard the ENTERPRISE with the aplomb of having made many such upward transfers. One of his first efforts, past relearning ship's routine and shipspeak, was to write his full-blooded cousin South. He welcomed him back among the 'land of living' (as human's were wont to say on such occasions,) and offered his assistance on the time theory.

Setting down South's reply, Spock turned, staring at the 'grand' decoration Marshall had just brought into the room. Pulling his eyes from the florid, multi plushed wall hanging Marshall showed him, Spock glanced back to the missive.

South graciously declined Spock's offer with a single word: "No."

Spock decided on his next career move. Living with Marshall and his flamboyant assaults of color made Spock all the more sure that Travers had indeed, been a jewel.



AFTERWARDS

By: Lynn Syck

Art by: Carole Swoboda

Dr. Leonard McCoy was angry. In the five days since Spock's funeral, his anger had grown from irritability to full-blown rage. He was not particular to whom he directed his feelings: nurses, patients, even innocent bystanders, like Carol Marcus, who stood across his desk at the moment.

"Well," he snapped, "what do you want?"

Carol's eyes widened slightly in surprise at his tone but she proceeded as if she had not noticed.

"I'd like to talk with you about Jim," she said quietly.

"What about him?" he growled.

"I think he's in trouble. He's not dealing with Spock's death well at all. He's retreating into himself."

"I thought you were a scientist. When did you begin practicing psychiatry?"

Carol ignored the taunt. "I don't have to have a degree in psychiatry to know that Jim's hurting, and if he doesn't get some relief, the pain is going to destroy him."

When McCoy did not respond, Carol continued. "I don't think Jim's eaten in days or slept for that matter. I've seen him roaming the corridors at all hours."

"I'm well aware of all that, Dr. Marcus."

"Then, what are you going to do..."

"Are you about to question my methods of treatment, Doctor?"

"No, of course not. It's just that I'm concerned for Jim," she answered with more irritation than she would have liked.

McCoy sighed deeply and covered his face with his hands. "I know, Carol. So am I. I just can't seem to make myself face him. He's been hurt so deeply that I don't know if I can reach him."

Carol moved around the desk to put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Jim isn't the only one who's been hurt, is he Leonard?" she asked softly.

McCoy's blue eyes met hers, and she saw such pain that she almost looked away.

"No, he's not. I miss that walking computer more than I would have ever thought possible. God, Carol, if you only knew how many nightmares I've had about this very thing. How would I comfort the one left behind? And now it's happened and I don't have any answers. For Jim or for me."

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

He managed a small smile. "You've been a big help, just by listening. Are you sure you don't practice psychiatry on the side?"

"I went to Jim, you know, right after the funeral. He was in shock, I think. He did cry, a little, but he couldn't seem to talk about Spock. And now...he's just so angry. He won't let anyone near him. David tried to comfort Jim, too, but couldn't make any headway."

McCoy nodded. "I know some of what Jim's feeling. I'm mad as hell at that damn Vulcan. How dare he do this to us?" McCoy's voice became louder as he gave vent to his anger. "And he accused me of having a martyr complex!"

He stopped, seemingly surprised at his own words. "I shouldn't have said that. It's just that...oh hell, there I go again. I've been taking out my pain on anybody who happens to come in range. I know I'm doing it, but I can't seem to help myself."

"You know you're the only person who can help Jim, don't you?"

"Yes," he said tiredly, coming to his feet. "You know, Carol, they shared a most unique relationship - a friendship that few people are ever privileged to be part of - or even to witness. There's never been anyone or anything, with the exception of the Enterprise, that Jim

loved more. It's as if he's lost half of himself. I don't think Jim ever considered that Spock might die first, probably never entered his mind."

"Or yours?"

"No. I guess I had wrapped myself in the same cotton batting. Regret is a terrible thing. I keep thinking of all the things I should have said to him and didn't. He was my friend and I loved him but I could never seem to get beyond our verbal sparring matches to tell him so."

Carol patted his shoulder in consolation. "Spock was very perceptive, Leonard. Don't you think he saw beyond that facade just as you saw beyond his?"

"I'd like to believe that. You know, you're quite some lady, Dr. Marcus. Jim should never have let you get away."

"I'm afraid it was me who let him get away."

McCoy gave her a small hug. "I'll do everything I can, Carol. Maybe Jim and I can help each other."

Jim Kirk lay on his bunk staring into the dark. So many thoughts and feelings washed over him, he felt he was drowning in them.

During his watch, he was able to push these thoughts to the back of his mind. He dreaded the quiet times... the time alone - when he had time to think, to remember.

He wanted nothing more than to forget, but every word, every moment he had spent in engineering that day was etched into his brain as clearly as if it were happening at this moment.

Kirk remembered the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. He had been unable to offer even empty words of solace. And when he felt the spirit, the sense of the Vulcan's presence leave him, it had left him more alone than if the universe had exploded and left him the only survivor.

"Jim?" Kirk jumped. He had not heard the door signal. McCoy stood framed in the lighted doorway.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"Jim... I'm sorry if I woke you."

"I wasn't sleeping," Kirk said shortly.

"So I've heard. Mind if I come in?"

"Why?" Kirk asked suspiciously, wearily getting up.

"I haven't had a chance to talk with you for several days. Please, Jim."

"Do as you like." Kirk waved the lights on and McCoy was shocked to see the way the familiar face had changed. He had only seen Kirk from a distance since they left the Genesis planet. The first day after the funeral had left the doctor with a false impression that the Captain was dealing fairly well with Spock's death. Later, depression had set in as the finality of Kirk's loss had been realized.

There were now lines of weariness and dark shadows under Kirk's eyes, crazed with grief. His cheeks were sunken and the hand that turned up the lights trembled.

Kirk moved to sit behind his desk, hands folded tightly in front of him. He wasn't going to make this discussion easy, McCoy realized.

"When did you eat last? Or sleep for that matter?" the doctor asked, taking the seat across from Kirk.

"Is this going to be a lecture on my health, Doctor? If so, you can consider it given." Kirk's face was closed and cold.

"Are you trying to commit suicide, Jim? If so, there are faster ways." The words hung in the air between them but McCoy caught a hint of fire in Kirk's eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about facing what's happened, accepting what can't be changed."

"There's nothing to accept and there's nothing wrong. Now, if you'll excuse me, I should make a tour of the bridge." He stood, pointedly keeping his hands clenched behind his back.

"I'm not leaving until we talk. Tell me what you're feeling, share your grief, don't try to carry it alone. You're not the only one who loved him, you know."

The quiet words almost breached the wall Kirk had built around himself - almost.

Kirk went to the bunk and picked up his uniform jacket. "You can stay here, if you like, Doctor. I have other duties to attend to."

McCoy moved in two strides to plant himself in Kirk's path. "You have to resolve your feelings of anger toward Spock before they destroy you!"

Kirk's face hardened and his hand froze in mid-air as he reached to fasten his jacket. "Anger? That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. Why would I be angry at him? He's dead."

"You're angry because you feel he deserted you, and since he's not here to face your anger, you're turning it inward. These feelings are going to destroy you if you don't deal with them!"

"Analysis noted, Doctor. Now get out of my way."

McCoy did not move but reached one hand to Jim's shoulder. The touch seemed to infuriate Kirk, and he hit McCoy with all the strength he could muster.

The doctor crumpled to the floor and lay unmoving, blood oozing from his split lip.

Kirk stood looking at him indifferently for a split second before reason returned. He went to McCoy's side and knelt beside him.

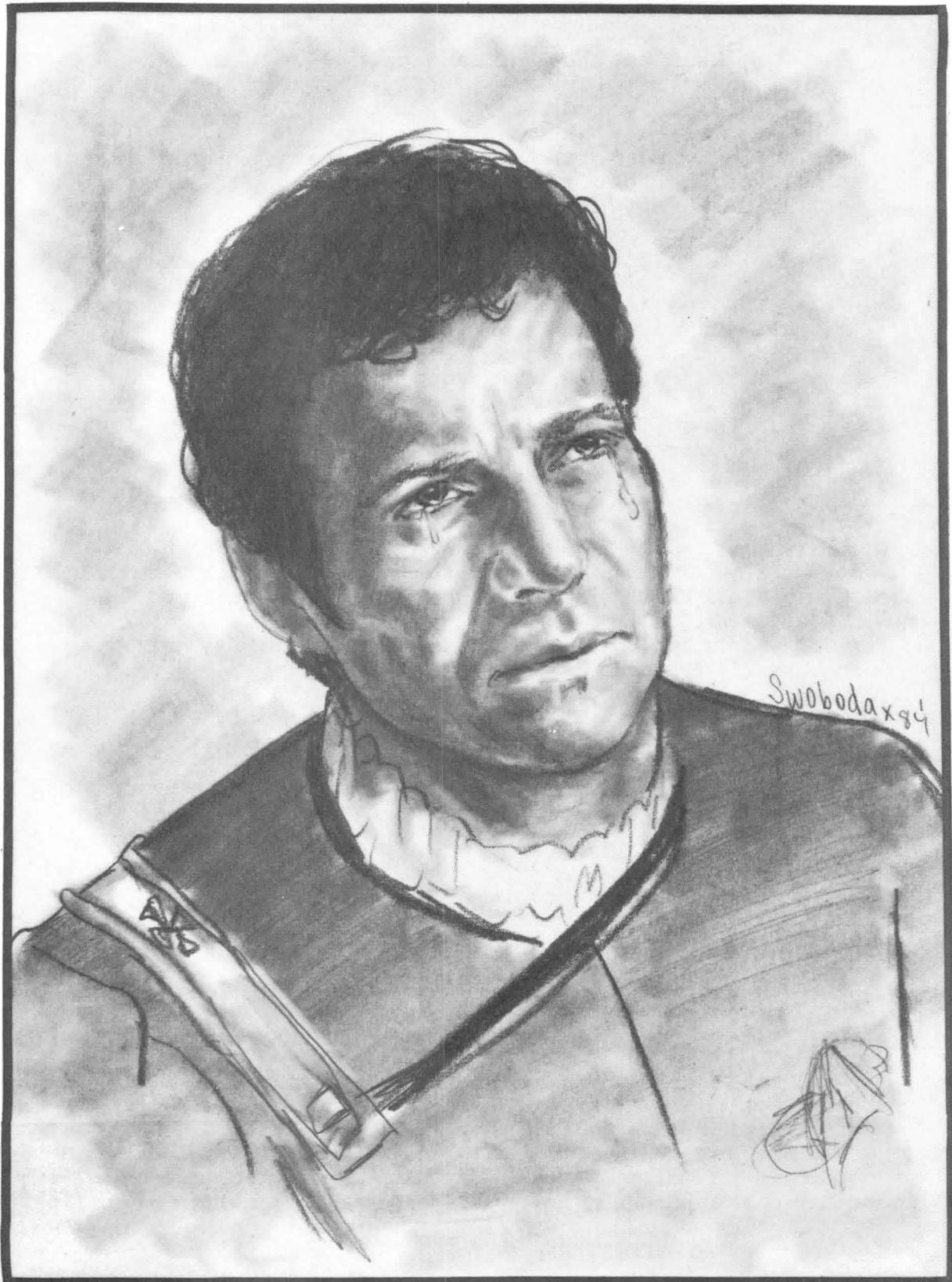
The doctor's eyes opened slowly and his hand went to his mouth. "Well, that's a start, I guess," he said ruefully.

"Shall I send for a medic?" Kirk asked dispassionately.

"No, thanks, I'm all right." McCoy struggled to his feet and Kirk made no move to help him. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

Kirk shook his head and moved to stand with his back to McCoy. His eyes fell on the chess set he and Spock had been playing only a few days before. Their last moves were frozen in time now, a mockery of happy times that could be no more. Kirk picked up the board and threw it against the wall, staring as the pieces shattered and fell to the floor.

"Why...why did he do it?" came the agonized whisper. "He had no right to leave me!"



McCoy kept still, hardly breathing, not wanting to disturb Jim's thoughts.

"I hate him for what he's done. Him and his damned logic - 'the needs of the many'. What about my needs? I need him with me, here, now!"

"He did what he had to do, Jim. If he hadn't, we'd all be dead. You know that."

Kirk did know that on some level of his mind but the feelings of betrayal and desertion did not permit rational thought.

"Didn't he know I'd rather be dead?" Kirk's shoulders slumped and still he refused to face McCoy.

"But there were other lives involved, Jim - more than four hundred lives that Spock could not allow to be sacrificed." He wiped a trickle of blood from his face with the back of his hand.

"I know," Kirk said bleakly, "but I still hate him. I will never, never again allow anyone to come that close to me. I've lost people I've loved, and I've dealt with it. But this, it's like I've died but I don't even have the release of death."

Something struck McCoy then. In every statement Kirk had made, he had never used Spock's name.

"Jim, this will pass, believe me. The pain will always be there but you will learn to deal with it. There is a first step - say his name."

Kirk's head snapped up and he whirled to face McCoy.
"What?"

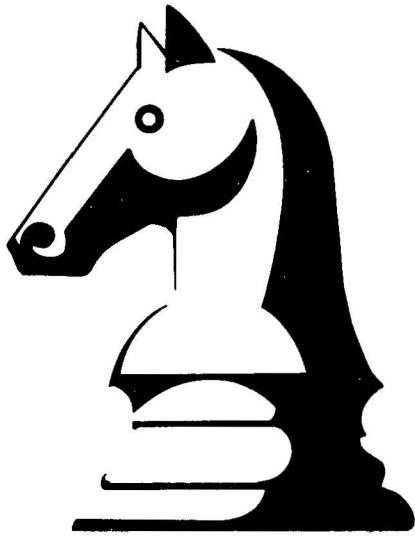
"The whole time I've been here, you haven't said his name."

Kirk returned to sit at his desk, his face mirroring his grief and anguish.

McCoy's throat closed against the tears that threatened to engulf him. "Say it Jim. Say his name and remember him with love, not anger."

Kirk laid his head down on his arms; the carefully built wall crumbled under the weight of love and kindness from McCoy. Out of the rubble of his soul came the cry of utter devastation and loss -- "Spock!"





THE RIGHT MOVE

by: Laurel Ridener

Art by: C. Myers

"Check, Captain."

Your soft voice interrupts my wool-gathering, and I see by the sparkle in your eyes and your almost-a-smile that I've lost again.

I can't help but smile back.

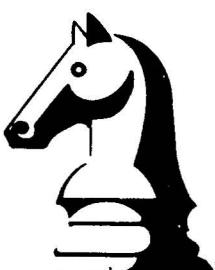
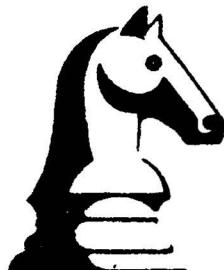
I suppose I should think of something appropriately philosophical to say about losing gracefully, but the game's not over yet -- I've still a trick or two up my sleeve.

"Watch" --my only concession to conversation. I've planned this move over your last five moves, counting solely on luck and Divine Intervention. I can't believe you haven't caught me at it, but then logic and calculation are your forte, and random multiple guessing leaves you speechless.

"And mate?" I grin, knowing I look the part of the cat who ate the canary as I move my victorious bishop.

You look at the board, then at me, and our minds seem to touch.

"So it would seem, Captain." you answer. And then you do smile.





emyus



TO HELP A FRIEND

by: Karen Hayden

Art by: Gennie Summers

What did I intend to say to you,
Whilst deep within the plak tow?
What could I say?
For you had been rejected
More completely than at any other time before -
And by your own kind, too.

"Spock...", I cried...
But how could I hope to help you cope
With the fever and the pain?
T'Pau stepped between us
With her words of warning.
And I had to succumb to her logic,
Despite what I wanted to do...

I wanted to hold you close,
To tell you how important you were to me,
To reassure you that as you had said
"My closest friend" to me, before beamdown,
I, too, felt that there was none closer
Than you to me.
I wanted to help you through what you now had to face.

But I could not do what I wanted to.
I had to stand by circumstance,
And succumb to tradition
And the laws and customs of your people,
And keep the pain I felt for you
Deep within my hidden soul.
For your sake - and for the sake of appearance.

But I vowed that later,
No matter what happened here on Vulcan,
I would tell you
Just how important you were to me, and how much I cared,
And that what 'they' thought of you
Should not - and DID NOT matter.....

THE FACES OF ETERNITY

by: Laurel Ridener

Art by: Merle Decker

It is a terrifying moment that lasts forever. I watch them squaring off, facing each other, anger and hurt flashing from their eyes.

I cannot lift my hand to stop them, I can barely speak. God, why do they do this to each other, to me? Why can't they see?

I try to speak, but strength -- or is it just the words? -- fail me. I feel the hot tears course down my cheeks, and curse myself for the weak fool that I am.

They need my strength, now, not my tears. I close my eyes, squeezing back the acid rain.

Please, no guilt, no blame. It was my decision, my choice, freely made. Nobody's fault, not even my own. I think I must be shouting, but my lips barely move, and I know they haven't heard me. From somewhere I must find the will to put an end to this.

It takes me a moment to realize the bitter arguing has stopped, no more accusations are quietly screamed at each other.

I feel a soft touch on my burning cheek, and know he has wiped away my tears. How can he ever know how much I cared for -- loved? -- him.

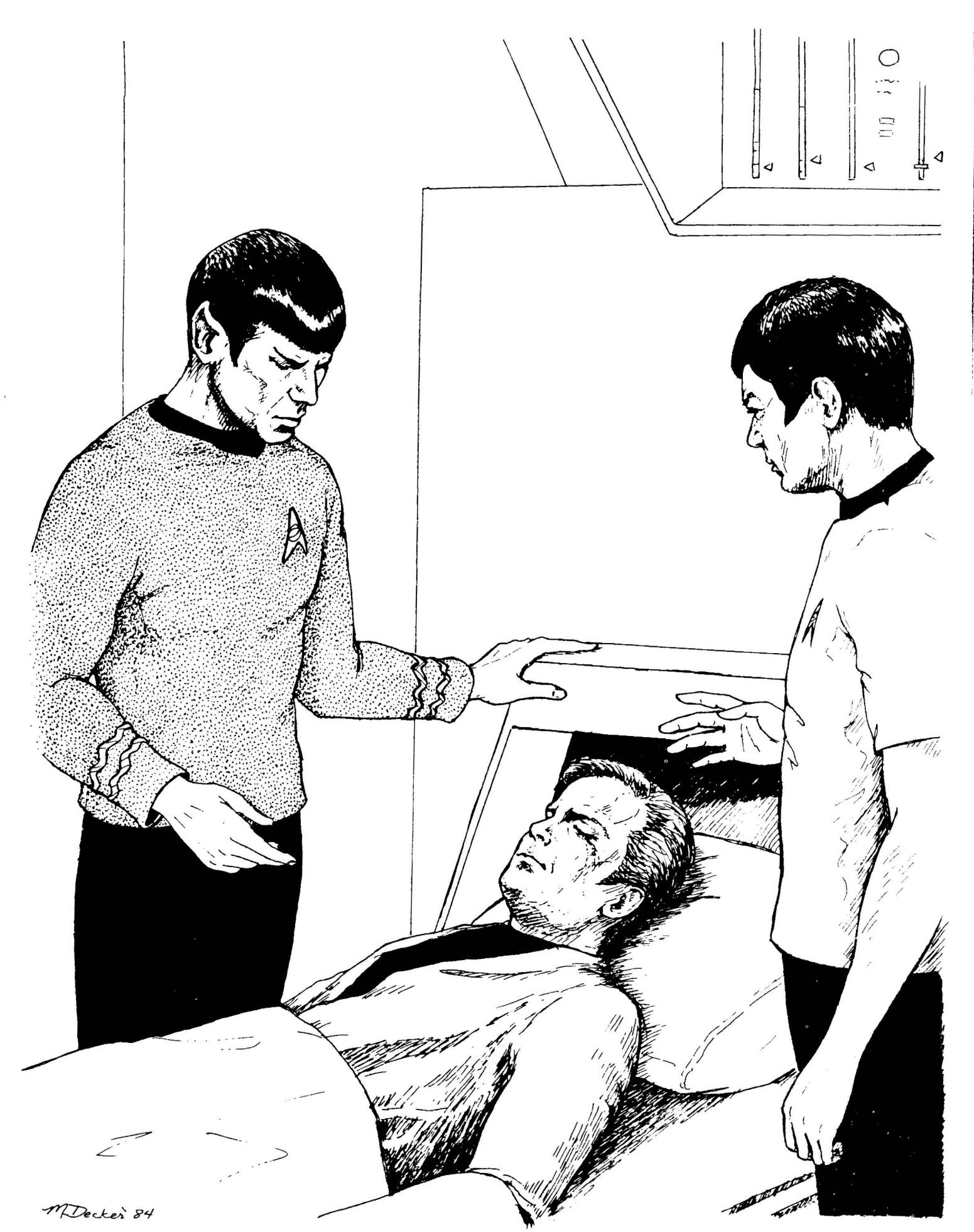
And the other. All those gruff words masking an inner self so compassionate, surely he knows I love him, too. His touch is so soothing on my forehead, magic fingers that seem to brush away the fire.

I don't know where I'll draw the strength but I must. I take the hand that brushes my cheek, and the hand that soothes my forehead, and place them together on my heart, binding them one to the other with the last of my will.

It is very quiet, no more angry words. I open my eyes and through the slate-gray haze, I see they are looking at each other, tears streaming from their own eyes.

The weeks of quarreling has finally stopped. If I could, I would tell them not to mourn, but to cherish each other -- I think they know that. The gain has been well worth the loss.

I smile at them both, taking their faces into Eternity with me.



M. Decker '84

ELEGY *for the* BRAVE

There's a deep blue valley
And the mountains I know
Where the sky is appealing
and warm breezes blow.

Where the meadow is in bloom
And the grass is soft and green
And the sunlight sprinkles diamonds
On a clear, flowing stream.

A pale young soldier
is asleep lying there
with the sun on his brow
and the dew on his hair.

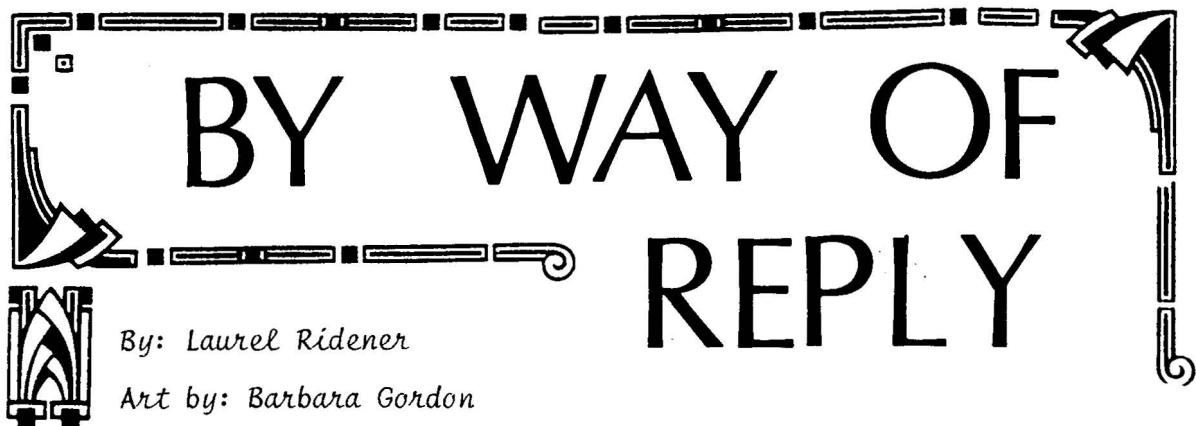
There's a look upon his face
like a lost and lonely child
As he sleeps upon the meadow
at rest for awhile.

He doesn't see the mountains
Or hear the river sigh
He doesn't feel the wind as it whispers
.... drifting by.

And he'll never see the sorrow
of the faces stained with tears
Or share the passing days
As they turn into years.

Oh the sleeper in the valley
has found his rest at last
As he lies in peaceful slumber
On the green meadow grass.

Taken from William Shatner: The Transformed Man, on Decca Records.
Words and music by Frank Davenport



BY WAY OF REPLY

By: Laurel Ridener

Art by: Barbara Gordon

I have before me on my screen a copy of my transfer. It is coded Command Prerogative rather than Personal. Were this a human dream, perhaps then I could understand exactly what it means.

It is official and in perfect order. All that is necessary to complete the procedure is my name on the designated line -- Accepted; Rejected; Rejected with Request for Command Hearing. If it were anyone else but you, I would think it some vicious prankster's game.

But the signature at the bottom clearly reads Kirk, James T., and I am at a loss as to why you would order my transfer, why you would wish to put a galaxy's distance between my life and me.

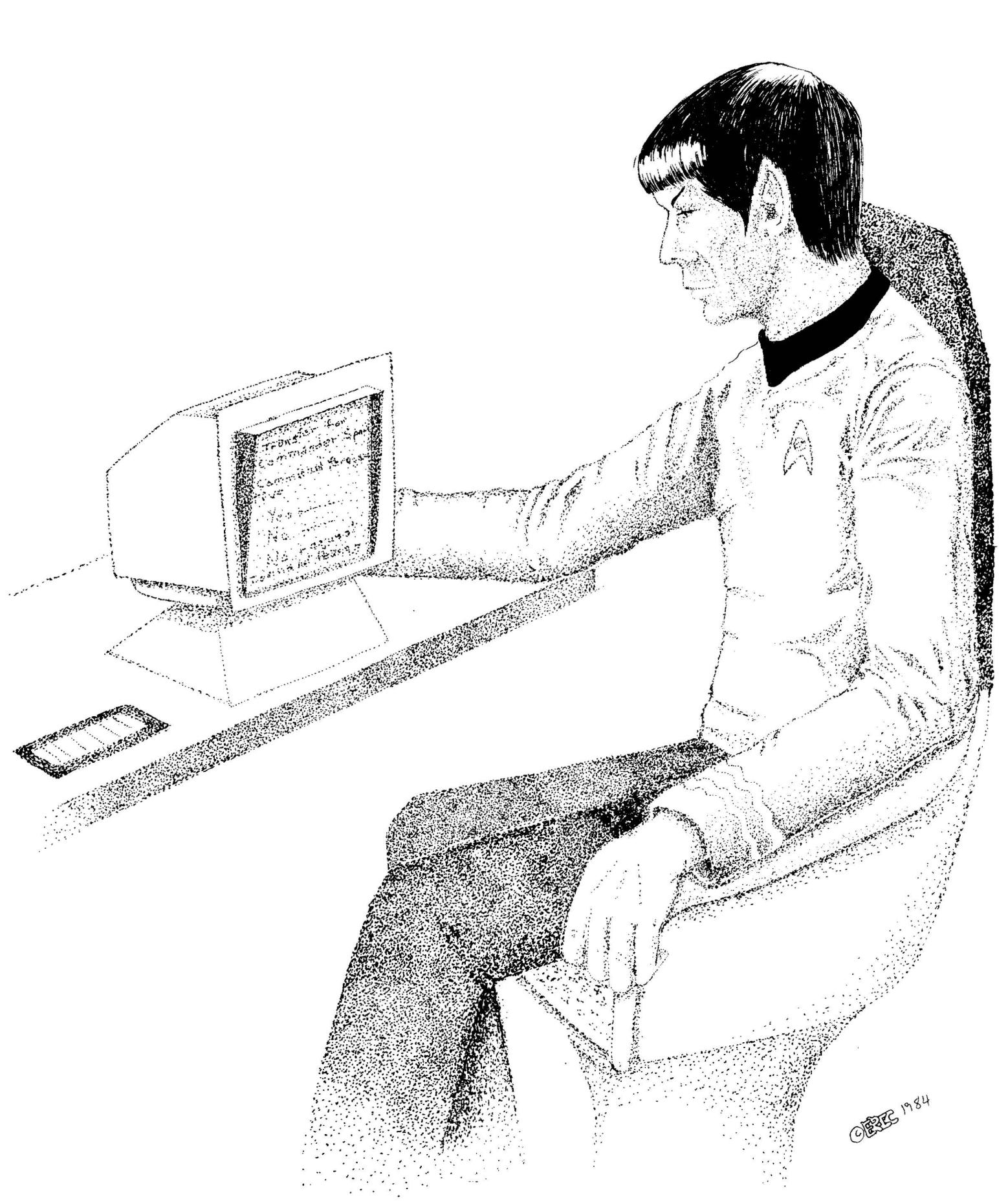
Several weeks ago you saw the recording of "Elegy for the Brave". It moved you deeply, and at the time I could not understand your covert glances in my direction. I should have realized then what you saw in that soft, gentle reading was your own bitter grave.

Did you glimpse your own mortality, and thereby perhaps mine? Was there something in that sad Earth rhyme that made you realize we move to a different time?

Did you perhaps see yourself as the one who slept, and I as the one who wept? Or did you perhaps see me as the one forced to stay, after death had taken you away?

Did you think that by forcing me to go, your death would have less meaning for me, or that I might never know?

Surely you could not believe that a mere order from Starfleet would change my destiny, or that your signature at the bottom of such a document would set me free?



Do you perceive what you would free me from? You would free me from the feeling, caring person I have become. You would free me from the beauty of a rising sun, of seeing dragons in cloudy skies, of seeing love shine in your hazel eyes.

You must know I would not trade one day we have shared for those few extra years. Of Death I have no fear, as long as I am by your side when it draws near. What would be the purpose of my living on, after you had gone?

I will refuse the transfer, a simple NO on the appropriate line will suffice. I will encode a copy to your quarters, with a request for a Command meeting in the morning; we will discuss this once, but never twice.

For all of time, or as much as is left to you and me, I will remain at your side, for that is the place I choose to be. Your concern touches me deeply, but you must be made to realize there are never any wasted years. Or tears.

But tomorrow morning won't be soon enough to banish all your fears ...



"Do you know the one - All I ask is a tall ship ... and a star to steer her by ... You could feel the wind at your back, about you, ... the sounds of the sea beneath you. And even if you take away the wind and the water, it is still the same. The ship is yours ... you can feel her ... and the stars are still there."

- *The Ultimate Computer*

McCoy on Kirk

BY: LYNN SYCK

How can I help him?
He wanders the corridors
at night, never sleeping.
His heart is broken as I
knew someday it would be.

How can I heal him?
His wounds are too deep for me to reach.
He turns stricken pleading eyes to me,
begging for my help.

How can I reach him?
He must get through the pain to a place of memories.
He must put aside his grief and somehow go on living.

How can I comfort him?
He has lost a part of himself
forever.
He has never faced death,
until now.

border: Caro Hedge

VISION OF DEATH

by: Lynn Syck

Art by: Carole Swoboda

Spock of Vulcan studied the flickering light of the firepot and saw only death - his own. He accepted the validity of this disclosure unquestioningly; such things were not unknown in Vulcan history.

For the past three nights, as he reached a certain level of meditation, the fact had made its presence known. He had no specifics of time or place or manner, only a sense of pervading heat and impenetrable blackness.

He rose calmly from his meditative pose and moved to sit behind his desk, hands steepled in front of him. His quarters were bare of any personal mementos or decorations, save the firepot. It was as if he had known that his stay here at the Academy would not be of long duration and so he had not even unpacked the things he had brought from the Enterprise.

The years since the ship had returned from the V'ger mission had, in some respects, been the most satisfying of his life. At the least, they had been the most peaceful.

No longer tormented by a desire to bury his human half under a rigidly Vulcan demeanor, his life had taken on a new tenor of calm and even happiness. The focus of that happiness was Admiral James T. Kirk. Spock knew Kirk longed to regain his ship, to leave behind his duties at the Academy and return to the stars. But if they were to be separated by death, at least Jim would be safe at his post here at the Academy.

Too many times over the years he had held Jim's broken, bleeding body in his arms, afraid that the Captain had taken one risk too many, afraid that Jim would be the one to leave him behind.

Now that fear had been allayed, at least. Jim would mourn him, would feel his death deeply. Spock had watched Kirk grow over the years from a brash young Captain into the finest officer in the Admiralty. Kirk had changed in many ways but one thing had not changed: death was an enemy and when Kirk lost a crewman or someone he loved, the depth of his feelings often nearly overwhelmed him. Spock knew his death would be almost more than Jim could bear. But he would not have to bear it alone. McCoy would be there to help. And Kirk would have his work.

For Spock, there was only Jim. His work was only a means to remain close to Kirk. If the Admiral asked him to resign his commission and leave with him immediately, Spock would not have to think twice.

Spock reached out a hand to touch the package on his desk: Jim's birthday present. It was a leather-bound book, a novel called A Tale of Two Cities. Spock had chosen it for its story of friendship. Now the parallel of the death of one friend for the other made the selection even more appropos. He allowed the smallest of smiles to play about his lips as he thought of how Jim would react when he saw it. In his mind, he could see the smile that would light up Jim's face, the warm hazel eyes that would shine with pleasure.

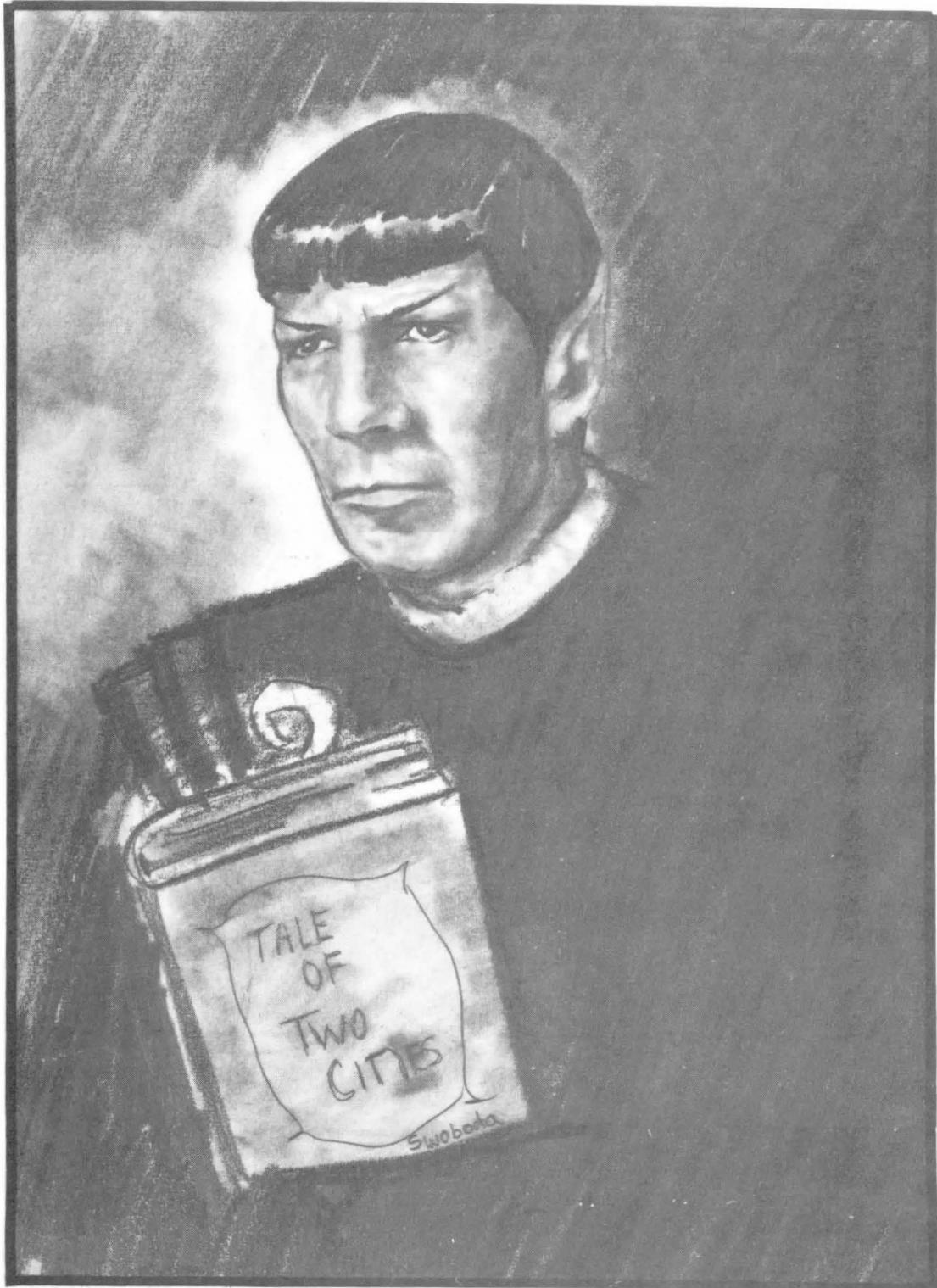
Spock knew that every moment would have to be savored. Every memory, no matter how insignificant, must be stored away. There was some small part of him, definitely the human part, he decided, the spoke of regret. But he would not allow that. The past years with Jim aboard the Enterprise, and even here at the Academy, had given him more happiness than he had ever hoped to find.

Spock thought of Vulcan and his parents, of his mother and the tears she would shed because of her son. Not the first tears, Spock was certain.

And Sarek. Spock had been at cross-purposes with his father for most of his life, culminating in Spock's choice of Star Fleet as a career. Sarek seemed to believe that his son's choice indicated a desire to be somehow less Vulcan when in actuality the reverse had been true. And now, all the years of training and studying had resulted in the ultimate revelation a Vulcan could experience - his own death. And Sarek would never know.

Spock stood, stretching tired muscles, knowing that now sleep was possible. He accepted what was to come and did not fear death. As a Star Fleet Officer, he had met death many times and knew its face. But as sleep took him, death's face faded to be replaced by a pair of laughing hazel eyes and a lop-sided grin.





Being back aboard the Enterprise, if only for a training cruise, had given Spock a sense of homecoming, a feeling of belonging he experienced nowhere else. Watching Jim assume command only increased the feeling. Even as he left the bridge to race to Engineering, knowing to the exact decimal point the odds against his ever returning, Spock felt only peace.

Now it was done. Radiation coursed through him, waves of pain carrying him away in a riptide of blazing agony. He stumbled and fell to one knee.

Spock held one hand in front of his face but could not see it. What had been revealed had come to pass: pervading heat and impenetrable blackness.

Through the pain and the blackness, came the agonized cry that nearly destroyed what little control he had left.

"Spock!"

From somewhere, he summoned the strength to climb to his feet, drawn to that voice. With characteristic propriety, he straightened his tunic and turned to walk the few feet that now seemed an almost uncrossable chasm. But he would cross it for beyond the door awaited the Admiral. No, the Captain. Always and ever the Captain, his Captain.

He tried to bring some words of comfort to sustain Jim. The link between them was so strong at that moment that it took all Spock's mental disciplines to shield against it. He longed for that bond as he never had in his life but he could not allow it. He would bear his pain alone; he would not burden Jim with it. That, and the safety of his ship and crew, were the last gifts he could give his Captain and his friend.

Then, finally, there was no more strength, no more time. Only pain and joy and loss and love and Spock felt them all and rejoiced.



"The glory of creation is in its infinite diversity."
"And in the way our differences combine to create
meaning and beauty."

- Is There in Truth No Beauty?

GENESIS

by: Lynn Syck

GENESIS -- BEGINNING.

A new world, evolving, growing -
living.

A fitting monument to one who
cherished life above all else.

GENESIS -- EVOLUTION.

A new life, desolate, sorrowful,
alone.

A monument to the loss of one
cherished above all others.



JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING

by: Karen Hayden

Art by: Gennie Summers

You continued to deny
That you could give up command
To save your father,
But you would have done anything
To save him!

I saw it in your eyes,
As you told me your reasons
For retaining that command of his ship.
I saw the pain, in your very stance,
In the way you closed your eyes against my presence and
what I said.

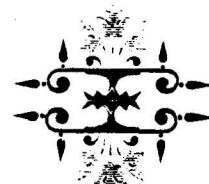
He who meant so much more to you
Than we did, was injured.
His life had been threatened,
And I could see that yours had been, too.
There is an unseen thread, that binds you both, soul to
soul.

I regret that...physical violence...which I presumed
Upon you - and your heritage.
It was my only way of showing you
How much I hurt inside,
To learn that he came before us, your own parents.

Kirk did get well.
Your mission was a success,
And life carried on as before -
Except for one thing...
I knew our lives would never be quite the same again.

Afterwards, with Sarek well again,
I understood. And accepted. And gave thanks
That you had finally found someone, your other half,
To make your life worthwhile.
You had found a home at last, and belonged.

But what is this thing called fate,
That it could teach me such a lesson
That I should have learnt on my own
As soon as we came aboard,
And saw you and he together.....





YESTERDAY'S DREAM

by: Marion McChesney

A hunger in the soul,
A longing in the heart.
A wistful wish for one long gone
The end of hope.
The death of dreams.

The shuttlecraft explosion killed a lot more than the Captain and the Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise. Now my soul is cold and empty. My body lives, my steps through time continue, but my heart is still. It died with them.

It seems as though yesterday had been only a dream: a comfortable enveloping dream in which I had lived. A fool's paradise they used to call it. Most appropriate.

At first, I tried to deny the pain. I performed all the logical steps that had to be taken, all the necessary rituals that accompany death. Now the burials are over, bureaucratic red tape is satisfied, and I am the new Captain of the Enterprise.

The numbness has worn off now, and grief fills my every waking moment. I should be able to turn off these emotions. Once I could have done so, but they taught me to feel: a lesson I could wish not to have learned so well.

Grief, however, is transitory. One day the pain will be gone. My life will continue. All will be as it should be...for a Vulcan. I will live.

But the dream will still be dead.



Sunbird Pt 2

VOYAGE NOCTURNE

by: Jennifer Weston

Art by: Carole Swoboda

"Where love rules, there is no will to power."
Carl Jung

For more than half an hour after Kirk retired, abandoning the siyul to them, Spock and Sarek made no attempt to speak. They sat on either side of the brazier, gazing into each other's faces, their expressions thoughtful - even detached. No human could have detected their true emotional state: a mutual rapture only Vulcans could experience - subtle, pristine, as much soothing as their separation had been bitter.

With some reluctance, Spock finally stirred and broke the silence. "How did you discover where I was?" he inquired formally, in Vulcan.

Sarek answered in the same language, his voice mellower than Spock remembered. "From a message, in a rather unorthodox medium, sent to me by your former communications officer - the one now stationed at Star Fleet Command."

Spock had already deduced Uhura's involvement. Undoubtedly, she had found out Sarek's location from the files under her charge. "Where have you been all this time?"

"Ursula." His father said the name quietly, as though anticipating the mental twinge it provoked in Spock. Ursula was the site of the accident that had terminated Captain Kirk's career. A traffic-control computer error had put the Enterprise on a collision course with the giant passenger vessel,

Lurkenz. The odds against such a thing were astronomical, the programmers insisted afterwards, but to no purpose. That there was little chance of it happening is never any consolation to the victims of 'million-to-one' catastrophes.

The last moments replayed in Spock's mind like a spectoral tape. The Enterprise had just entered the docking-slot of Repair Satellite VR-85 for minor maintenance work. Spock recalled the image of pale walls filling the top, bottom, and left side of the bridge viewing-screen. McCoy and Mr. Scott would remember, too. They had been on the bridge at the time, trying to coax the captain into coming on shore leave with them. The doctor had been in the middle of that old threat to decree a medical order when he, and everyone else, had been stunned by the appearance of a massive metallic bulk ahead, swiftly bearing down on their starboard side. Kirk had had less than a second to consider the alternatives: collide or dodge in the only direction available. He had shouted to Sulu to swerve to port.

The images of what followed Spock recalled in especially vivid detail. The blur of the Lurkenz sweeping past and the distant crunch of the Enterprise's port nacelle impacting with the docking slot wall; the much louder crash and flashing on the screen as the nacelle exploded, ripping hull-plating from most of the saucer's port side. Clearest of all, Spock remembered the dazzle of red lights erupting across the consoles, indicating ten decks had just been flushed with hard radiation.

At his trial, Kirk had stated, if he had to do it over again, he would take the same action. Better to risk 432 lives than two thousand, even if the 432 were friends, and the two thousand, strangers. The twenty-one hundred aboard the Lurkenz had survived, but Christine Chapel, Lt. Kevin Riley, Transporter Chief Kyle, Lt. Leslie, Ensign Garrovick and 278 others had died on the Enterprise. "Died unnecessarily", the prosecution insisted. Kirk had over-reacted - there had been time to safely swerve up or downward. There would even have been time to get out of the slot had not Kirk been exceeding the legal speed for docking/maneuvers, etc... all untrue. No honest jury would have given Jim more than a reprimand, as had the Ursolian court which tried the Lurkenz's captain. The sentence handed down to Kirk - four years in Brewster Penitentiary - had convinced Spock there was some organized obstruction of justice involved, even before he had stolen that memo from Commodore Lyle's disposal unit.

In retrospect, it did seem inevitable that Sarek should have chosen to live out his exile on the same planet. The notoriously shy, reserved Ursulians would be ideal neighbors for a man who wanted no inquiries made into his past, but only to be left alone with his disgrace. Spock studied his father again. Sarek's hair was paler, the lines on his face deeper and more numerous. But his eyes were unchanged; deep and gentle, touched with sadness - perhaps slightly more now, but considering what he must have been living with, he had aged remarkably little.

Sarek was speaking again. "I avoided making use of any commercial transportation on the journey here. Most of it was made aboard various freighters." A spark of his old humor returned. "On several occasions, without the crews' knowledge. We may logically assume that Star Fleet, and thus the Rodinium Shield, are unaware that I am now here."

Mention of that name brought Spock to full alertness. "How much did Uhura tell you?"

"In words, very little." Sarek turned back a fold of his travel-worn cloak and reached into a narrow, concealed pocket. "That the corruption must be extensive, and formidable, I deduced from the fact that she found it necessary to send me word of it in this form." He drew out a small wooden sculpture and handed it to his son. A Terran might have thought it was supposed to be a dragon, but Spock immediately recognized it as a Vulcan species: the Crimson Sand Lizard, symbol of secrets. Spock made a mental note to someday ask Uhura where she had learned that association.

"If you will examine the scales closely," his father instructed. Spock did, and presently detected that they were English letters, turned every-which-way as a further disguise. Sarek indicated the lizard's head. "Start here, and turn the figure laterally." By doing so, Spock managed to make out:

AMBASSADORESAREK:YOUKNOWMEASCOMMUNICATIONS
OFFICERONENTERPRISEIAMNOWSTATIONEDATSTAR
FLEETCOMMANDWHEREIHAVEDISCOVEREDTHATACORRUPT
CLIQUENAMEDRODINIUMSHIELDWASRESPONSIBLEFOR
COURTMARTIALOFTHEYOURSONCONTACTHIMNEARLINDOLAN
ONPLANETESKARTOLEARNTHEFULLSTORYTELLNOONEOFTHIS

Spock raised an admiring eyebrow. "How very resourceful of her."

His father folded his hands on his knees. "Tell me of this organization."

Spock carefully set the lizard sculpture on the arm of his chair and began. "Our knowledge of it is still fragmentary. James Kirk and I have a number of associates still within Star Fleet who are presently engaged in collecting pertinent data. Indications are that there are literally hundreds of members at every level of the Fleet, as well as within the governments of several Federation planets. Its leaders, Admirals Fitzgerald, Komack and Fitzpatrick, have directed the Shield's involvement in a number of highly illegal activities. Among those we can prove are extortion, obstruction of justice, falsifying records, and sabotage."

Something haunted flickered through Sarek's eyes, for a moment making him appear decades older. "Sabotage of the Enterprise?"

"Undoubtedly. Proctor Keelius of Rigel was instructed by the Shield's operatives to have the ship's engines carefully damaged while the Enterprise was dry-docked for repairs. That was why I was forced to engage the destruct sequence after our shields were ruptured in the Roystadt battle. Seven months ago, Lt.-Commander Uhura located a correspondence proving this to be the case. I have a copy, the original is now in the possession of Star Fleet's Surgeon General. My own captain was similarly victimized. I personally secured a memo from Admiral Komack to one of Kirk's jurors, urging a vote for conviction."

"Why have you not confronted Star Fleet with these documents?"

Spock shifted his position. "If the Rodinium Shield has as many members in positions of power as it appears, it would accomplish little to convict only a few. Our goal is the elimination of the entire organization. The most logical method of achieving this would be to obtain evidence against a substantial proportion of its members and present everything at once. In such a situation, they would not be able to protect each other as they would if we moved against them one at a time. The necessary evidence is being collected by our operatives."

"What number are your allies?

"Twenty-two, at last report: Uhura, Surgeon General Johannson and her personal secretary, Dray, at Star Fleet Command; Chief Surgeon M'Benga, and nurses Shaw and Hisaka on the Republic; Commander Sulu, Chief Surgeon Wabisi, Records Officer Messenger, Lts. Kasindorf and Behle, Ensigns Gogrej and Kebba, and Yeoman Cruguet on the Eagle; Chief Surgeon McCoy, Chief Engineer Scott, Sub-Engineers Rasmussen and Algeo, and Yeoman Korbecki on the Kongo; Captain and Commander Driscoll in my own fleet."

"Their rate of progress?"

Spock's eyes strayed to a point near the opposite wall where, earlier that night, Kirk had made a disconcertingly apt remark about 'two-meter plots'. "Proportionate to the difficulties involved, very rapid. In proportion to what remains to be done, quite slow. They are too few to maintain more than a fragmented communications system with each other and with us. We must, of course, be exceedingly cautious about recruiting new conspirators."

Sarek, who had been listening attentively through the entire narrative, finally straightened. "It is to help alleviate that difficulty that I have come here."

Spock nodded respectfully. "Your assistance would be greatly appreciated."

"More than assistance." Sarek was as grave as Spock had ever seen him. "I have come to offer you Kaythan-Velm."

For perhaps the fifth time in his life, Spock was shocked into immobility. "Kaythan..." he almost whispered, then: "You are my father!"

"A father is as capable of wronging another, even to his own son, as any other Vulcan. It was to deal with such situations that Kaythan-Velm was developed millenia ago."

Spock found it nearly impossible to even consider the idea. "To the best of my knowledge, the institution of such a relationship between parent and offspring is totally unprecedented."

"These circumstances are also unprecedented. Your cause obviously requires an agent capable of moving freely within the Federation. I can give you that."

"You can give it without making yourself my total subordinate. You do not owe me that."

Very quietly: "Do I not, after I declared you unfit to live?"

Spock found it necessary to address the floor. "You were obligated to do so by Tradition. So it was for the Vulcan Council, which bears responsibility for the integrity of our laws. The bloodiest events in our planet's history illustrate the corruptive influence of 'oath-breakers'. Given the evidence the Rodinium Shield presented, the Council had no choice but to exile me. I do not blame them, or you."

The elder Vulcan's eyes softened, but he made no comment on what he had observed. There had been a hint of monotone in his son's rationalization, suggesting that Spock must have recited it repeatedly in an effort to convince himself of its validity. Instead, Sarek leaned forward and spoke gently.

"However, it is now clear that the evidence provided them was untrue, and so, also clear that I have done you great wrong. I doubted you when you spoke only truth. I abandoned you when you most needed my help. Realizing this, it is entirely logical for me to offer you my servitude as an alternative to carrying a burden of guilt for the remainder of my life. For my sake, if not for your own, accept this from me."

Spock kept his eyes down, obviously still reluctant. "I shall give the matter due consideration, Father."

"Use as much time as you require. You do not need to decide rapidly." Settling back again, Sarek asked, "Now, tell me of your personal circumstances."

His son seemed relieved to return to unemotional topics. "I have a wife, T'Prenn, a step-daughter, and two children of my own. In the morning I shall introduce you to them."

Something in Sarek's expression indicated he had already deduced that the marriage was less than ideal. "Spock, is it a good bonding?"

"We are together of necessity, and for convenience. She sees to the children."

"Is that enough for you?"

"It has been adequate thus far. Jim Kirk's arrival has made a significant improvement."

Sarek nodded comprehendingly. "I had expected to find the human here. It is as it should be."

"Financially, I am well situated. I own an import/export company with four transport vessels. Kirk is in command of one, the Driscolls of another. It is largely through these that we maintain communications with our operatives."

"Do you also communicate with Amanda?"

Again, sudden silence. Sarek's facial muscles tensed, and Spock knew he had already guessed.

"Mother is dead," Spock finally said.

Sarek was silent, thoughtful, then: "Understood. How long?"

"Four years, three months, eleven days."

"The cause of her death?"

"Cardiopulmonary arrest. Possibly aggravated by the events following my court-martial." They both knew he should have said 'definitely'. Perhaps empathically, Spock found that old wound as raw and painful as when he himself had first learned the news.

Sarek only nodded and said no more. Intuitively, the younger Vulcan rose from his chair. "If you will excuse me, Father..."

Sarek waved a dismissal. After a moment's hesitation, Spock moved toward the door which opened to the outside. He, too, needed some time alone, to come to terms with the memories his father's return had stirred in him.

At the threshold, he paused and looked back. Sarek had drawn his chair closer to the wall brazier and was staring into it intently. His position and expression were identical to those Spock had been assuming for so many nights over the past seven months. Sarek, too, would have to employ the trance state to purge himself of the hatred provoked by the loss of one he had so loved. Spock retired to the Eskarian night and the privacy it would provide.

It was the beginning of Summer on this part of Eskar. The night breeze brushed his face like a warm caress. It bore a moist-plant smell, hinting that the eastern horizon would soon be acquiring its first traces of green. *Blood green.* Spock suddenly understood why humans were known to find red skies oppressive. *Red skies ...*

Thoughtful hours passed. The hemlocks swayed seductively in the gentle wind, but it was not at them that Spock gazed. He looked beyond, to the open country; kilometer after kilometer of flat, sandy plain under brilliant stars. Why was it he had never before appreciated how much they resembled his own planet's deserts? Perhaps this was why he had found peace there, when night had stolen away the alien colors and made the landscape resemble Vulcan. An unaccustomed sense of longing enfolded him as visions of vermillion dunes under crimson skies swept past his mind's eye. For some part of him, that was Home, and always would be. He wanted...something more fundamental than to go back. He wanted to be allowed to go back.

Not logical, his Vulcan self protested. But his new-found tolerance for his emotional self countered, *Neither am I totally governed by logic.*

He realized something else now; that he had always felt at ease on the Enterprise because there he had never felt barred from his earlier home. But this world - this planet where he had learned the meaning of exile - this could never be home to him.

Sarek must have known this feeling, too...on Ursula, with its turquoise sky and orange-tinted landscape, without even the prospect of rejoining a friend as consolation for his shame and loneliness. Learning of his son's innocence could not alone have undone all of that. It was the possibility of helping to reveal that innocence to the entire Federation which had rescued him from what would have completely destroyed a lesser man's spirit. Spock could not deny Sarek the chance. He must, he would accept Kaythan-Velm from him. With Sarek working for the conspiracy, their chances of success would be immeasurably improved.

Spock heard the door open behind him, but did not turn at once. This had happened several times before. Sarek apparently had some way of sensing when his son had just made a major decision. One of the subtler forms of telepathy, probably; Spock had never questioned him about it.

Their eyes met, and they regarded each other for another long moment. It would have been desecration for Spock to announce his acceptance with mere words. Without speaking, they stepped closer and raised hands to each other's faces to form the bond. Kaythan-Velm could be instituted via correspondence if the participants were unable to get to each other, but the preferred method involved forming an unobtrusive mind-link which would be maintained until the designated task was completed, and then automatically dissolve.

For over a minute they remained melded, each probing just deeply enough to feel the other's determination, letting it strengthen and reinforce his own.

"Until the fulfillment of this undertaking, my life is your own.
Nreshav."^{*}

Spock replied; "Until the fulfillment of this undertaking, your life is my own. Nreshav."

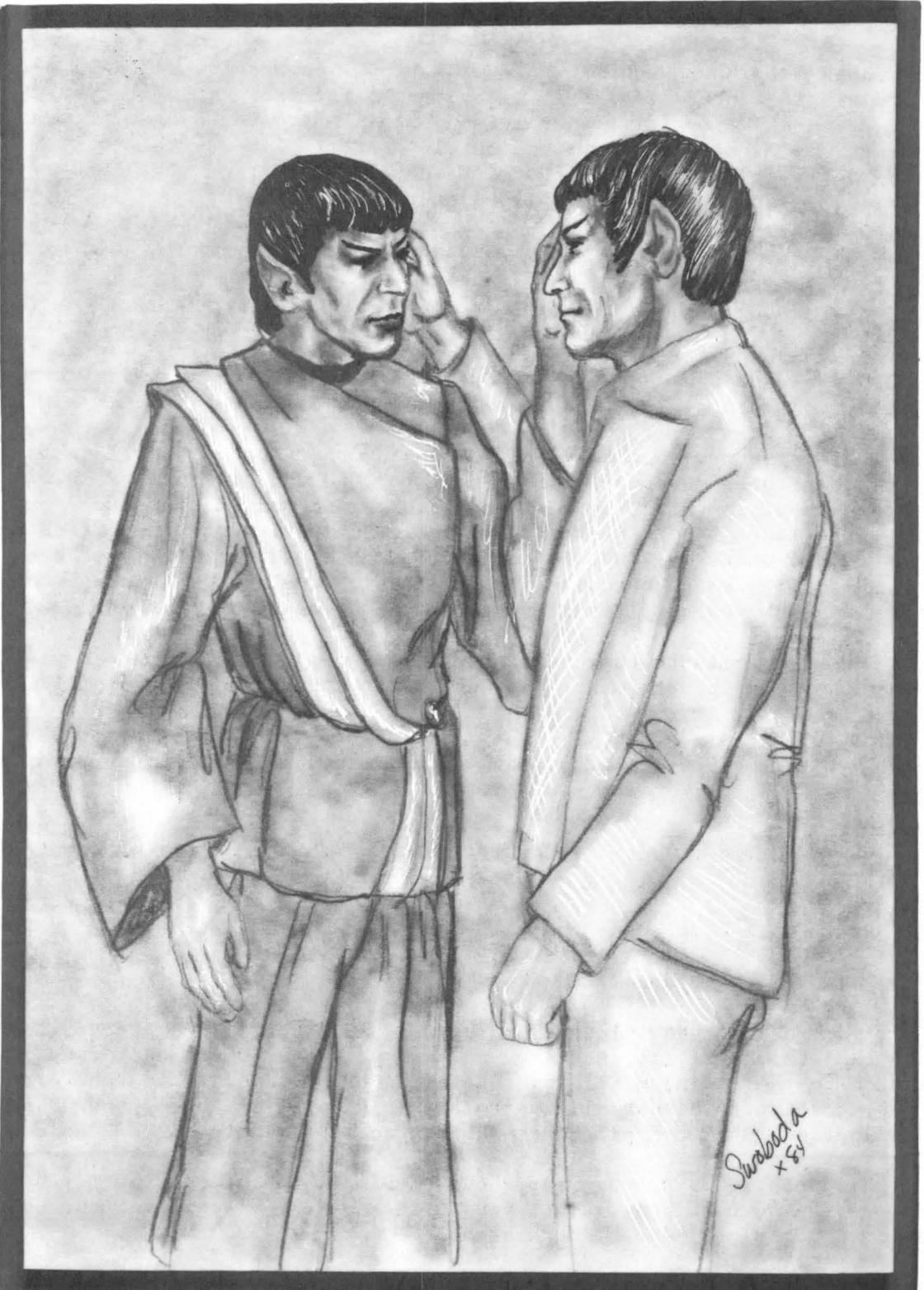
The ritual completed, the meld was broken.

"What is to be done?" Sarek asked.

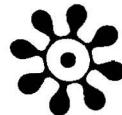
Spock had already planned his answer. "It would be a great asset to our cause, and to myself, to learn how our own planet's government stands in relation to the Rodinium Shield. What I want you to do is to return to Vulcan, and try to discover if there are Shield-bearers among the Council. I cannot believe the corruption has managed to subordinate all of them."

His father was already far ahead of him. "And if not, we may be able to disprove the accusations against you to the council's satisfaction, thus gaining powerful allies. I understand."

^{*}'Nreshav'; Vulcan ceremonial term; 'This Shall Be So'



Spock noticed manifestations of the link: the new deference on Sarek's manner, the tone of command in his own, but he no longer felt any misgivings. "Precisely. I shall contact the Methenvar within the next hour. By evening, Commander Driscoll should be here with a shuttlecraft to take you to Vulcan."



The mesa-shaped building finally became visible among the Eskarian flora, and Kirk almost felt regret that his journey home was nearly over. All the way through he had been elated with the prospect of telling Spock about the latest delivery from the Republic.

Kirk swung his flyer to the roof with a single sharp maneuver that would have done credit to any professional navigator. As the turbo-lift slid open for the craft and began to descend, he touched his breast-pocket and grinned at the sound of crackling plasticine. Admiral Fitzgerald would have had a different reaction. In fact, he would probably be appalled to learn that someone had uncovered an account of his role in the Third Venician Conflict. Kudos were due to M'Benga and his nursing staff, and would be delivered the next time Kirk saw them. This was their first evidence against an Admiral, and it just happened to be the S-O-B who had refused Spock permission to beam down to Gideon to rescue his captain many years ago. The Vulcan was going to enjoy hearing about this.

Still glowing with that prospect, Kirk stowed the flyer and jauntily mounted the conveyor. As he approached his own entranceway (the door was rarely shut before sundown), he heard a woman's voice pronouncing a sentence in Vulcan, and two children diligently repeating it after her. T'Prenn instructing her daughters - a familiar, homey sound. The voices stopped as Kirk entered, and he saw T'Prenn rise and move across the room toward him.

"Good afternoon, M'am," Kirk greeted, pausing to note how handsome she looked today. She had put on some weight over the past month - just enough to make her look more slender than emaciated, and the wide room's indirect lighting gave her cascade of ebony hair a luminous sheen.

T'Prenn returned his greeting, then straightened formally. "Spock wishes you to join him in the siyul as soon as it is convenient for you," she stated dispassionately.

Kirk felt a too-familiar twinge of apprehension. "Has something happened?"

"Rurtharnk^{*} Sarek has returned."

"Already?!" The captain started for the siyul without waiting for an answer. Spock's father had left for Vulcan only four weeks ago, after spending less than a day with his new family. When Kirk questioned Spock, he had only replied that Sarek was voluntarily going in search of information for the conspiracy, and had raised an indignant eyebrow at Jim's protest that it was too dangerous a mission for one man.

* 'Rurtharnk'; Vulcan, proper term to use in reference to one's in-laws

Kirk made some fast calculations. Such an early return meant Sarek must have started back within two days of reaching his destination. That meant he'd either been forced to leave, or he had learned something of immediate importance.

Kirk had to restrain himself from bursting into the siyul unannounced. Urgently, he knocked on the door. "Come in," a voice - he could not tell whose - invited from within.

He entered to find the two Vulcans sitting near the brazier, looking, he would swear, rather pleased with themselves. A third chair was drawn up between them. At a gesture from Spock, Kirk came over and sat down.

"I'm glad to see you back, Ambassador. Did you find out anything?" he immediately asked Sarek.

"A number of things," Sarek answered smoothly, unruffled at the minimum of formalities. "One, in particular, could be of considerable significance to your operations. I have just finished giving Spock my account of it."

"Unexpected, but not astonishing," was the younger Vulcan's summary. Definitely pleased. It was some kind of good news then. Kirk looked to Sarek hopefully.

"I had very little difficulty gaining access to the ruling Council," Spock's father began. "Since I had entered exile voluntarily, my reappearance in Shi-Kar, while technically legal, drew considerable attention. I was shortly contacted by a Council official, asking to know the purpose of my return. I told him, truthfully, that having meditated sufficiently on the matter, I had come to claim my 'Right of Knowledge.' This is a provision in our law giving any Vulcan the right to demand full explanation of any Council decision against a family member. As I had not made use of this Right at the time of Spock's exile, I was granted audience one day after my arrival. My original intention was simply to search for any indication of falsehood in the Council's answer to me, as there would have to be were any of them under the influence of the Rodinium Shield. Spock may have told you, Vulcans have ways of detecting lies among our own people. ("He's mentioned it," Kirk said.) Using those, I discovered no falsehood. However, the answer itself was extremely interesting." Sarek paused thoughtfully. The human subdued his own impatience, knowing that Sarek would not appreciate any emotionally motivated demand to hurry. Vulcans, Kirk knew from long experience, preferred to give a thorough account, even if it meant a delay in getting to the point.

"Spock's alleged oath-violation was only one factor involved in their decision to revoke his citizenship. I can only assume your adversaries at Star fleet Command were concerned that Spock would continue his investigation of your court-martial, were he allowed to remain within the Federation. Arrangements for his exile had been made months before the Enterprise was lost. During that interval, the Vulcan Council received a number of reports from Admiral Komack's office. It was, he explained, his painful duty to inform Vulcan's governors that, since obtaining the captaincy, Spock had been guilty of highly unbecoming conduct."

Kirk shot a puzzled glance at his friend. This was good news? "Were any specifics offered?"

"Quite a few." Sarek, too, looked toward Spock. "Among them, that he had made several unauthorized, unreported contacts with representatives of the Klingon Empire, that irregularities in his financial records indicated he was involved in illicit profiteering ventures, that they had strong evidence he had committed 'gross abuse of privileges' with several of his crew-women..."

It went on, but Kirk was too busy dealing with a sudden tightening of his viscera to listen. He'd thought he had learned too much to be shocked by any further revelations about the Rodinium Shield's noxious activities, but that misconception was now dashed. The idea of supposedly respectable Fleet officials conducting a smear campaign, against Spock, of all people, surpassed every sleazy skullduggery Kirk had ever heard before.

When Sarek finished the list, Kirk shook his head. "How could anyone have ever believed such...such..." he groped futilely for a sufficiently vile term.

"The Vulcan Council is, in some ways, much too idealistic," Spock's father replied. "It would never occur to any of them to deliberately slander an opponent, thus it never occurred to them that Star Fleet might."

"I'll just bet the fact of Spock's human ancestry had something to do with it," Kirk snapped.

"It may have," Sarek admitted, so humbly that Kirk wished he hadn't said it.

"I do not believe so," Spock countered. "These reports were sent from a supposedly unimpeachable source. No bigotry would have been required on the Council's part to conclude that I was, in fact, guilty."

"Do you find being mud-slung so pleasureable, Spock?"

"No, Jim. However, I am relieved to learn the Council's decision was not a simple matter of Star Fleet's word being accepted over my own."

But Kirk, only human, just felt thoroughly disgusted. "It makes me wonder what else we're going to uncover before this is over. 'Gross abuse of privileges'! What kind of mind could have conceived of tacking that one on you?"

"A mind familiar with Vulcan mores. It appears that Admiral Komack is the Shield-bearer in charge of dealing with our Council. Perhaps we should pass that information on to the conspiracy."

"There are even more important opportunities here." Sarek bent forward earnestly. "I suggested to the Council that they may have been given false information. When they offered to examine any evidence I could present, I told them I would attempt to acquire it. If your organization can secure such evidence, it could be the turning point of your endeavor. You will gain superlatively potent allies if you convince the Vulcan government that Star Fleet has lied to them. They will not allow such a betrayal to go unpunished."

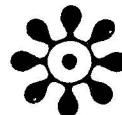
Growing excitement displaced Kirk's feelings of illness. "I'm sure we can. There must have been correspondence about this among the Shield's leaders. If we give her the dates when the reports were issued, Uhura can probably come up with the necessary documents, and with the Surgeon General's help, find some way to deliver them to Vulcan."

"We will need you there to pass them on to the Council members," Spock told his father. "It would look too extraordinary for any of our operatives to contact Vulcan's government directly. As soon as the Mithenvar completes its present assignment, I shall have Ms. Driscoll pilot you back to Vulcan. This time, both of you will remain there until the required evidence has been delivered and examined, then the Commander will return to Eskar to notify us of the Council's decision. If it is a favorable one, you are to remain behind to serve as the conspiracy's contact with the Council."

"Acknowledged," Sarek nodded obediently.

Kirk observed the exchange with surprise, and some disapproval, for it seemed to him a rather high-handed way of dealing with one's father. But neither Vulcan offered him any explanation for their behavior. Kaythan-Velm was far too personal a matter.

"And we will deliver that evidence, Sarek," Kirk assured. To himself he added, *Even if I have to personally dispatch every Admiral in Star Fleet to get it!*



Johannson stepped back to observe, with no small satisfaction, that the ocean of plasticine presently obscuring her desk-top was beginning to take on some semblance of order. Hundreds of reports, folios and dossiers - just a fraction of the paperwork involved in authorizing a new vaccine - had been sorted and were now being divided into organized stacks. The Surgeon General selected several and packed them into the one-meter square transfer box, suspended between anti-gravs, which floated in the center of the office. She had been taking it home, full to the brim, every evening this week. And if she knew the bureaucracy around here, that pattern would continue, intermittently, for another month at least. Anyone looking in or her would imagine she had more than enough to occupy her attention; few people could guess how frequently her mind strayed to a matter a thousand times more important.

She had just resumed sorting when her door signal rang. It took her a moment to locate the intercom among the stacks. "Who is it?"

"Lt. Commander Uhura, M'am."

Sigrid reflexively glanced at a certain self-installed indicator beside the voice-grid before answering. "Come in."

The Bantu woman entered with yet another sheath of documents under her arm. "Good afternoon, General."

"'Afternoon.'" As she replied, Johannson extended a closed fist over the desk, opening it as it came level with the intercom. Uhura nodded, and shook her head wryly. Such manifestations of paranoia were common in Star Fleet Command. There was no reason to ascribe any particular significance to this one. It would give them no problem anyway; they had both lived here long enough to master the art of saying two things at once.

Uhura opened her bundle. "I've located those comparative studies of Vulcan glandular systems you asked for."

At the word 'Vulcan', Sigrid's expression underwent a change, similar to a fox scenting a rabbit. "Good, I need those rather urgently. Are you certain you've got the right ones?"

Uhura knew she was really asking "Are you sure you've got something the Vulcan Council will find convincing?"

"I'm certain," she responded casually as she drew out the sheets and handed them to Johannson one at a time. "Here are the transcripts, all validated; Preliminary Study by Kwin, 0657.7; Supplement to Kwin Study by Dorf and Self, 2349.0; Analogous Functionings of Vulcanoid and Human Lymphatic Systems by T'Mar and Enright, 5443.6; and," with a special flourish, "Unique Properties of Vulcan and Rigellian Endocrine Glandular Systems by Shimazu, 7793.2."

The Surgeon General glanced over the studies in the order they had been given to her. As she opened the last one she tilted her head, pretending to be surprised at finding an extra paper tucked inside. By the time she had finished scanning it, her eyes were gleaming with triumph.

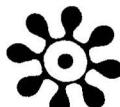
"Yes, that's what I wanted." Her voice gave no hint of how she looked.

Uhura's tone was equally light. "I thought it would be. Will you require any further assistance?"

"None, thanks. The Republic's Chief Surgeon, M'Benga, is scheduled to pay me a visit in a few days. He'll supply me with any other information I need. He's an authority of Vulcan physiology - goes there regularly for study."

"I understand."

And both women took full advantage of the fact that the intercom could not hear a slyly delighted smile.



At that moment, in another part of Star Fleet Command, Commander Raphael Adiarte, a boyish-looking young officer with hard eyes, was activating the door signal outside Admiral Komack's office.

"Who's that?" Komack's perpetually impatient voice snapped from the intercom.

"Adiarte, sir."

"Come."

The door opened, and Adiarte strode across the room to stand before the Admiral's massive desk. Komack, bent over a small stack of memos, did not look up at once - one of his subtler methods of reminding his subordinates of their place, the younger man recognized. As a Shield-Bearer-in-Training, Adiarte appreciated what his dealings with Komack could do for his career, but he never enjoyed them. Colleagues could, with sincerity, praise the Admiral's drive, leadership capability and indomitable will, but not even the most admiring of them could credit him with amiability.

Komack had fought his way to the top - 'fought' being no poetic exaggeration. That grappling up the ranks which most officers considered the normal course of a Star Fleet career, and the moderately ambitious found an exhilarating challenge, was a grim struggle for people like Komack. Ever driven by envy of those with more power, he had studied, labored, excelled and, in the latter phases, lied and cheated to gain the apex. That process had included numerous encounters with individuals possessed by similar brands of ambition, and these had permanently distorted his outlook. Even now, after obtaining one of the most powerful positions in the Federation, he still tended to regard most of his associates as potential deposers.

The Admiral finally pushed the memos aside, and looked his underling over before speaking. The younger man met his eyes coolly, determined to display no sense of subjugation.

"How've you been, Adiarte?" Komack inquired mechanically, as though he did not care about the answer.

"Fine, sir."

"How are you doing with my project?"

"Well, I got it past the first snag, but there are still problems. It would speed things up if I could get Commodore Olandeen's assistance."

"Don't let Olandeen in on it unless you absolutely have to. He's never given me the impression of being completely dedicated to the Shield. We'd never have let him in if we hadn't needed him for that Kirk business, five years back."

"I'll try to make do without him, then. There's also that problem with the clearance; I don't think I'm going to be able to sneak that past Commodore Stone."

"Stone won't give you any trouble if you just convince him it's for the good of the service. He'd walk into Hell for the service. Is that all?"

Adiarte shifted his feet. "No. I also came here to discuss something that doesn't pertain to your project."

Komack did not inquire what. Adiarte continued after an awkward pause.

"I've been doing some private research lately, and I've come up with some indications that a person, or persons, in Star Fleet may be spying on our activities."

The casually made pronouncement had the desired effect; Komack sat up straight and regarded the commander intently. Adiarte, relishing the rare situation of having the Admiral's full attention, remained silent this time until Komack had to ask, "What indications?"

"For one thing, a lot of our Base personnel have been sending in reports of files being 'disturbed'. Common occurrence; it didn't seem like anything to be concerned about until I compared the dates of those files. There's a disconcerting correlation from base to base of..."

"What sort of disturbances?" Komack demanded sharply.

The Commander had to check back anger at being interrupted at his moment of climax. "Various indications that they'd been looked at without authorization; disrupted guard-circuits, power drains on the micro-scanners, things of that nature."

"Nothing stolen?"

"No reports of that. It would take the expertise of a Record's Officer to conceal that kind of tampering."

"Then on what basis do you assume these are indications of spying on the Shield in particular?"

"Only that the dates of the disturbed files correlate from base to base, and with a few of our more important ventures. For example; Starbases Seven and Eleven both report having their 8800.0 thru 9000.0 files examined, and the ruptured circuitry on Bases Ten and Twelve were both over the 7300.0 thru 7400.0 sections, and Three reports that someone temporarily removed the entire 8929.0."

Komack's bushy eyebrows, ever ready to draw together into a scowl, contracted on cue. "Is that as close as they've ever correlated?"

"Yes. But..."

"That's too wide a margin to draw any specific conclusion from. Most likely its someone checking up on their own service record; there's a hundred cases like that every year."

Adiarte was baffled by the Admiral's nonchalance. "Even if it is, aren't you concerned about what they could be stumbling across while..."

"You're forgetting, Commander, that all records of our activities are worded to make sense only to those who already know the particulars of the incidents referred to. To anyone else, they read like ordinary accounts of ordinary missions."

"It isn't that difficult to decipher the real meanings. I've done it myself."

"My, aren't you the worrier. Very well, Adiarte, in the interest of giving over-caution preference over under-caution, I'll instruct all our base personnel to take special precautions against having their files opened without authorization, and to take into custody anyone caught trying it. I suppose you've already checked the correlation of the starships present at the different bases when these break-ins occurred?"

"I wasn't able to with any great accuracy. Few of the reporters could determine exactly when the files had been opened. All we know for certain is that it wasn't anyone from the Yorktown, the Intrepid II, the Krieger or the Potempkin."

"That leaves three-fourths of the Fleet suspect. Again, too wide a margin to do anything with, even assuming it is a spy-job. Have you any other reason for believing it is, Commander?"

Adiarte gathered the last shreds of his tattered self-importance. "There have also been messages from the Federation Border Patrol of an unusually large number of unauthorized border crossings by unidentified vehicles in Sector L-37. Compounded with the reports of file break-ins, this suggests the possibility of..."

"Finally, something concrete! This is a matter of definite concern; many Federation-world economies could be seriously affected by large-scale smuggling operations."

"But, Admiral, I meant it could mean..."

"Sector L-37, eh? There are several Klingon allies beyond that...Yes, Altair Six has been complaining long enough. It's past time for us to put a dent in it. Instruct Sub-Admiral Lyle from me to double the number of guard vessels in that sector, and equip 'em with full-range tractors. Any vehicles attempting to jump the border are to be taken to Star Base Fourteen with full cargo and crew for questioning. We'll get these smugglers into their kennels, once and for all. Dismissed." And he returned his full attention to the memo stack.

"Yes...sir," was all Adiarte could manage after Komack's whirlwind proclamation. He turned and left the admiral's office with the confused expression of a man who wasn't sure whether he had gotten what he wanted or not.

The instant the door closed, Komack shoved the memos aside and slammed open his intercom. "Raphine, get me Admirals Fitzgerald and Fitzpatrick."

"Acknowledged. One moment, please."

As he waited, Komack grimly congratulated himself on having correctly judged Adiarte's caliber. An eye for detail, indeed! There weren't many Fleet officers who would have taken time to discover that correlation of dates, without orders or any assurance of reward. He only needed to squelch

that assertive streak in the man to make Adiarte a very useful Shield-bearer. To that end, Komack made a point of never telling the commander when he had done something important.

The receptionist spoke hesitantly. "Sir, Admiral Fitzgerald is presently in conference with..."

"Well, get him out of it!"

"Yessir." Another moment, then: "Fitzpatrick and Fitzgerald both standing by, sir."

"Put 'em through. And secure this channel against eves-dropping."

He heard the usual vague buzz of the 'Snoop-Proofer' being activated, then a familiar and very agitated voice promptly burst from the grid. "What the hell's goin' on, Mat?! I've just had to leave two Andorian officials in..."

"This is Shield business," Komack interrupted, and Fitzgerald cut himself off in mid-word. "Arron, you there?"

"Right here, Matthew," came the voice of Fitzpatrick, always the least excitable of the three.

"Both of you, report to my office immediately."

Fitzgerald made an exasperated sound. "Can't it wait 'til the conference is over?"

"No, Donald, it can not." Komack used the deathly-calm tone he employed only to honor the most serious circumstances. "The Rodinium Shield may well be facing as great a threat as it's ever known."



Commander Driscoll checked her scanners for the twelfth time since entering Sector L-37. Still blank, except for vague sensor blips denoting guard-vessels yet too distant to detect her on their own scanners. She leaned back in her shuttlecraft chair and tried to relax under the spectacle of stars placidly sliding by. It was difficult. Very disturbing, that there were so many more blips now than there'd been three weeks ago, when she had chauffeured Sarek to Vulcan on his second trip out. Now she was returning to Eskar, carrying the most important message ever entrusted to her. The first half of the journey had gone easily enough, but this unusual abundance of border-patrol ships was putting her on edge.

That was just as well, for it made her snap to instant alertness when one of the blips began to solidify. She studied the scope carefully. Yes, definitely a vessel. Her hand swept across the console and switched on the probe jammers to prevent the other ship from taking any detailed readings of the shuttle's interior. She, on the other hand, could read the border-guard clearly; a Class 1 Scout vessel, solid now, but making no discernible attempt to intercept her. If she were very lucky, it would not try.

Commander Driscoll knew from her own Star Fleet experience that it was not unusual for border-patrols to ignore shuttle-sized smugglers, since the power-cost required to catch one was usually greater than the value of any contraband such a small ship could hold. That was, unless something of particular value had been recently stolen from the Federation. Dilithium crystals, for instance, or military information...

Abruptly, the scout vessel swerved directly toward her. Almarine set her jaw and activated her auxiliary power. The guard vessel did the same, and the chase was on.

A quick scrutiny of the readings reassured her. She knew a scout's speed to be only slightly faster than that of her own ship, and the distance between them was so great that it would not get close enough to use its tractor beams before she would reach the Federation border. Once beyond that point, she would almost certainly be safe. That sector of space was under the jurisdiction of Lathaive, a small but strategically important Federation ally world whose inhabitants would very much resent any intrusion on their space by Star Fleet vessels. Only in the most extreme emergency would the border-patrol risk arousing the infamous Lathaivian wrath. And even if that scout managed to work up more speed, there was still plenty of room to spare before...

Almarine's eyes widened with disbelief at what the scanners showed, even as she reflexively yanked the controls to dodge her pursuer's first grab. It should not have come as a surprise that the range of a ship's tractor beams had been extended since she had left Star Fleet, but by such a great degree?! Some engineer must have been working on them with the single-mindedness of an Ursulian.

Again and again the beams sprang forth. Driscoll was careful to evade them by the narrowest possible margin, to lose the lowest amount of forward momentum. She could maneuver a shuttle better than anyone she'd ever met, it was for this skill that Captain Sterling had given her the pet name 'Moth'. For a split second she caught herself wishing he were with her, and chided herself for such a juvenile thought. She'd get away all right. The beams were being fired between intervals so long that her forward speed was hardly being affected. She would still make it over the border before they caught up.

A sudden volley of tractor-shots broke from the scout, keeping her completely occupied for over a minute. Someone aboard the Scout had evidently deduced the same thing and was intent upon forcing her to dodge wildly up and down, port and starboard.

He can't keep it up, it'll drain his power, she told herself between frantic jabs at the steering mechanism. But he did keep it up long enough to gain more than a solar system's width on her, before settling back into the relentless grab-and-swerve pattern.

Almarine did some rapid figuring and her stomach turned cold when she arrived at the answer. She had lost too much distance. Before she could make it to the border the arc of that tractor would be too narrow to dodge. Almost involuntarily, her stare moved to her last alternative; an inconspicuous pair of switches set into the console's upper right corner. She and Sterling had

installed them, and designed the mechanism to which they were connected: a relay which would channel all the shuttle's power into one sudden forward thrust. There had never been an occasion to test it, but theoretically it should snap her speed to Warp Twelve. Activated at the right instant, it should fling her across the border before that Scout had a chance to close.

But it was a dangerous chance. The engines could not take such a power surge for more than twenty seconds. If the shuttle's artificial gravity units were unable to handle that kind of acceleration, Almarine could be rendered unconscious, and her ship would gain the other side of the border only to give the Lathaivians the brightest fireworks display their space had ever seen.

Driscoll's attention was torn from the dilemma as the tractors were fired again, missing her by the closest margin yet. The arc was narrowing rapidly. Alma glanced back at the small shipping-crate strapped against the aft bulkhead and forced herself to consider what the consequences would be if its contents were to fall into the hands of the Rodinium Shield. The speculation simultaneously chilled and hardened her. Indecisive no longer, she pulled the first switch.

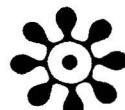
As the red line in the adjacent indicator began to climb, she checked the distance to the border. The second switch must be activated at the last possible moment to assure she would make it across before the power build-up reached Super Critical. Another shot from the tractor nearly grazed the shuttle's port side, and Almarine realized, close enough or not, she had no time left. Locking her left hand around the panel's edge, she whispered a few words and slammed down the second switch.

She heard, rather than felt, the solid thump as she impacted against the shuttle's back wall. For a full ten seconds she lay stunned, staring at the wavery ceiling, trying to remember what was happening. What was that ghastly whining noise? The engines sounded as though...The Engines!!!

She jerked herself into a sitting position, stared half a second as the console's status light changed from yellow to orange, jumped to her feet, and her left knee promptly gave out. The whining rose to a shriek as she scrambled across the deck toward the light, now fiery red. Almarine very nearly cried out as she forced the injured leg to thrust her up to the instrument panel to hit the shut-down buttons.

For a moment she thought the deceleration was going to roll her across the board and against the window, but the pressure gradually slackened off, along with the engine's wail. *That's all I can do*, Driscoll thought resignedly as the indicators returned to normal. But one more thing had to be tended to before she lugged the console chair back into place and slumped into it. Dutifully, Alma checked the sensors.

She was across the Federation border. The scout-vessel had turned back.



"And you are quite sure the border-guard had no opportunity to scan the interior of your shuttle, Commander?"

Almarine considered a moment before answering her employer. "Well, I switched the 'jammers on, the second that Scout came into range; I'd had them off previously, to conserve energy. I suppose they could have gotten something the first moment after I channeled all power into the emergency warp, but only..." She heard a sharp inhalation beside her, and turned a mock-exasperated expression toward it. "Really, Sterling, I believe you're more shaken up about it than I am."

"Ms. Driscoll, it is the prerogative of all captains to get 'shaken up' over the things that almost happen to their first officers," Kirk countered from the living room table, where he was busily removing fastenings from the shipping crate. He and Spock had willingly forsaken thoughts of sleep when the Driscolls arrived with it well after nightfall by Eskar time. Especially after being told the box contained the Vulcan Council's reply to that file transcript, secured by Uhura and delivered by M'Benga, in which Admiral Komack had acquainted one of his colleagues with the surest method of getting "Cptn S' exiled from his home planet. Kirk had been eagerly expecting this delivery since getting word of what Uhura had done and as he pried off the numerous clasps he felt his anticipation sharpening. This was rather like being a small boy at Christmas again.

It was Spock, frowning slightly as he pondered Almarine's story, who seemed more intent on other matters. "There are disturbing implications to this matter of extra border-guards at Sector L-37. At the least, it means the increased number of unauthorized ships passing through that area had been noticed. At the most, it could indicate that the Rodinium Shield is aware of our intentions."

Four faces looked somber as the facts and possible conclusions were individually considered. "They can't know very much about it, or they would have followed Alma across the border," Sterling offered.

"A persuasive argument, Captain Driscoll. But, in any event, we cannot risk arousing greater concern at this time. Our operatives must be instructed to cease all excursions through L-37. From now on messages are to be passed through other Sectors."

"What about your father?" Sterling inquired.

"Sarek will remain on Vulcan, to function as our contact with the Council. I have already discussed this with him."

Almarine looked concerned. "When I was there, I couldn't help noticing the general population still considers him officially disgraced. The Council won't dare provoke Shield curiosity by declaring him back in favor. Your father could be in for a very unpleasant time..." Her words trailed off as Spock drew himself erect.

"My father," he stated with obvious pride, "is a Vulcan."

Commander Driscoll fidgeted self-consciously, drawing Sterling's attention to how thoroughly exhausted she appeared.

"Sir, if you won't be needing us for anything else, we really ought to get back to the Mithenvar. Alma hasn't had a chance to get any sleep and that knee needs more treatment."

"By all means, Captain."

Good-nights were exchanged all around and the Driscolls left, Almarine leaning heavily on her husband's arm to ease her injured limb.

Kirk yanked the last few fastenings from the crate, but felt a twinge of apprehension as he considered Star Fleet might already know what it contained. "What do you think, Spock?" he asked, stepping back to allow his friend the honor of opening it. "Is there any possibility that scout got a last-second scan of this?"

"I should not worry about it, even if they did. Very few individuals possess enough knowledge of ancient Vulcan history to know of the war-time methods Clan-rulers used to relay instructions to their field-officers."

With that, Spock threw back the lid. Kirk blinked at the unexpected sight of three large, smooth-skinned vegetables, powder-green with magneta vein-work. "Gourds?"

"Ionclav-dese: 'message fruit'," Spock corrected. He lifted the first one and tugged at the stem. It came off like a cork, exposing a narrow cylindrical hollow in the center of the gourd.

"I see!" Kirk reached for the next fruit himself. When this also contained nothing, he confidently opened the third, and received a rude shock when it, too, turned out to be empty. "Spock, someone stole the message!"

The Vulcan was amused at how readily Kirk had fallen for the ruse. "That is what anyone attempting to waylay the messenger was supposed to assume," he commented. He picked up one of the discarded stems and broke it lengthwise, exposing a small, tightly-rolled parchment in its center. Too relieved to feel foolish, Kirk extracted the scroll and carefully rolled it out on the table. To his disappointment, the writing was in Vulcan.

Spock bent over the document and read it silently, while Kirk studied his face. To an inexperienced observer that visage would have appeared blank, but Kirk had had enough practice reading those fragments of expression, momentary tensing of facial muscles and slight widening of the eyes, to realize his friend was reacting strongly.

Spock finally straightened, but took a few seconds to collect himself before he announced, "The Vulcan Council has accepted our evidence."

Although he had never truly expected anything else, Kirk felt an almost savage jubilation sweep through him, tempered only by the suspicion that there had to be something more in that scroll to affect Spock so strongly.

"Anything else?" he asked casually.

"They also...offer to restore full citizenship to me and my family."

"You're not considering accepting it, are you?"

Spock was surprised at the human's reaction. "Have I any reason not to?"

"After what they did?! They swallowed a pack of Orion-trader's stories about you, shipped you off to die a slow, miserable death in Pon Farr, and now they think all they have to do is say 'It's been a misunderstanding, Spock, let's forget about the whole thing', and you'll come running back like..."

"Jim, this is not an attempt at reconciliation on their parts. It is simply the logical action for them to take once convinced they were lied to. They exiled me on the same basis."

"That's completely beyond me, how any system can just strip away a person's honor, then hand it back, with no feeling either way."

"Indeed. And I have never understood your own systems, which make prominent emotionalism mandatory in such matters."

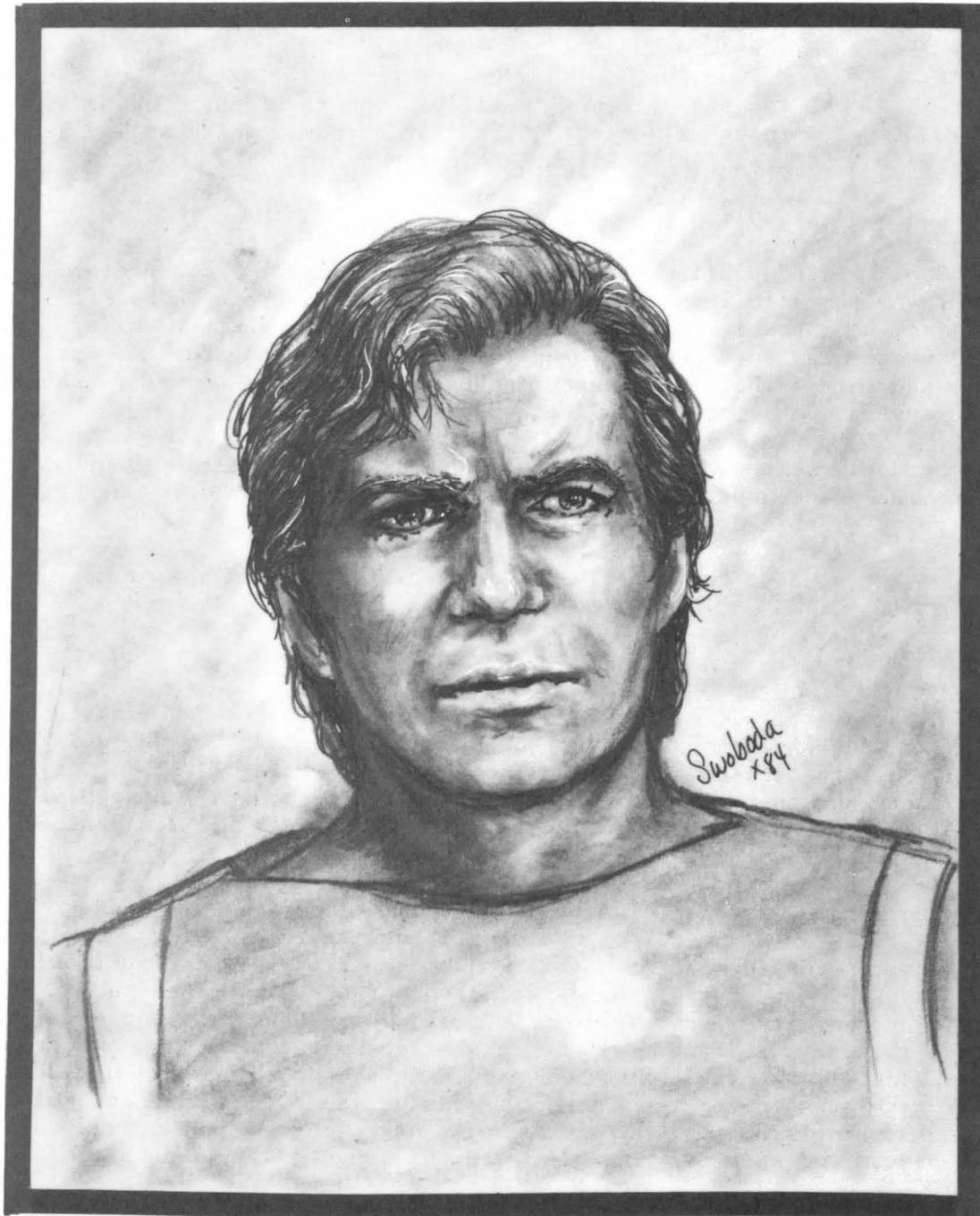
Kirk almost made a sharp reply, but stopped himself. It wasn't in his place to complain, if Spock was willing to forgive and forget.

"As it happens, they recommend that I not re-establish my citizenship at this time," the Vulcan continued. "Star Fleet would almost certainly get word of it, and that, coupled with my father's return to Vulcan, could provoke dangerous questions. But, it may be worthwhile to take advantage of their offer, should we ever find it necessary to return to the Federation. That would protect us from being deported on the basis of..."

"Us? Are they offering reparation and citizenship to me, too?"

"They will if I request it." Spock looked toward the bottom of the parchment. "In addition, so as to most effectively further our efforts against the Rodinium Shield, the Council proposes to inform every Vulcan officer in Star Fleet of the situation, and instruct them to render every possible aid to our organization. The operatives we will thus gain include the entire crew of the Intrepid II, Commander T'Karim and Lieutenants Selave and Shurgan of the Potempkin, Lieutenant Salm of the Exeter, Lieutenant-Commander Salk and Ensigns T'Ren and Shoam of the Krieger, Commodore Saleak of Star Base One, Commodore T'Mrenn of Star Base Thirteen, Commanders T'Fain and Sontev of Star Base four...Captain, are you all right?"

"Am I All Right!" Unable to contain his elation any longer, Kirk grabbed Spock by the shoulders and shook him from sheer joy. "Spock, this is it! We've got it - what we've always needed most! We have enough people now to give the conspiracy a solid structure - more than enough! Spock, we're going to win!!"



Spock endured the shaking with his usual stoicism, but extracted himself politely the moment Kirk loosened his grip. Kirk's wide grin became slightly embarrassed for a second, acknowledging that his behavior was totally illogical, but he repeated, "We're actually going to win this, Spock. Nothing's going to stop us now."

"Jim, I believe you could use some rest."

"Wha.. Oh, you mean I'm acting silly. You're right, good news in the first hours of morning is worse than Saurian brandy." Kirk sighed happily. "I'll see you at breakfast. Bright and early!"

"Good-night, Jim."

Spock waited until the human had vanished into his own bedroom. Then he leaned over the scroll again and slowly re-read it. When he had finished the last line, he shut his eyes and stood motionless for quite a while. Special mental processes had to be employed to fully comprehend that he, Spock, son of Sarek, had become the first person in Vulcan history to be offered Kaythan-Velm by every member of the Ruling Council.

Suddenly seized by the desire to share this incredible event with someone, he glanced at Kirk's door...but, no. There was only one being within light-years capable of appreciating what this meant.

He gathered up the scroll and moved toward T'Prenn's room.



A barrage of odors, ranging from mildly pleasant to abominable, wafted over Sulu and Messenger as they stepped across the cafe threshold. They paused there to accustom themselves to the dim lighting. Dark interiors were the norm in Rarcon, one of the less reputable areas on Star Base Nine, and one that Fleet personnel seldom cared to visit. It was that circumstance which had made them select it as their meeting place.

One glance was sufficient to assure them there were, indeed, no other officers from the Eagle or Kongo present. Having this confirmed, both men examined the crowded room in detail. A wide variety of scruffy-looking humanoids stood and sat at the delapidated bar and mismatched tables and chairs: humans, Andorians, Tellerites, dead-white Denedians and even one brawny, rhinoceros-skinned Lathaivian who looked ready to pass out from over-consumption of whatever that green liquid in his drinking bowl was. A trio of linear Alverstan women, wrapped in filmy blue gauze that matched their hair, were meandering from table to table, eyes narrowing suggestively. Variegated smoke-clouds and noisy arguments in a dozen languages filled what was left of the air.

Sulu noted baleful stares greeting them from several quarters. 'Fleeters' were not well-liked in this neighborhood, but there was no one present he and Messenger could not handle together. The two friends cut eyes, each reassured by the other's steadfastness, and crossed the room to a table with four chairs against the back wall.

As they sat down, Sulu gingerly fingered the table-surface and wondered when it had last been washed. Messenger extracted his pipe from a belt-pouch and set about creating his own contribution to the smoke haze. A battered mechanical servator took their orders, deposited them with no special care, and scuttled noisily away.

The waiting was decisively uncomfortable. Sulu sipped his drink about once a minute. Messenger did not give his even that much attention. His gaze settled indifferently on the entrance-way, but his fingers were traveling over every part of his pipe - a sure sign of unease. Even in refined surroundings the New Englander had a hearty dislike of crowds. In this place it must have been multiplied by a factor Sulu did not care to guess at. At one point, an Alverstan started toward their table, but a glare from Messenger sent her in another direction.

Nearly a quarter-hour passed, and Sulu was beginning to wonder if their communication to the Kongo had been intercepted, when Messenger stiffened alertly. Sulu refrained from looking toward the door; just in case someone was watching them. This meeting must have the appearance of a coincidence. Messenger extended his pipe to the table's disposal unit and rapped it sharply against the edge three times - the 'all clear' signal. A few seconds later, Sulu heard two people approaching. He looked up and let a plausible imitation of pleased surprise spread over his face. "Hello, Doctor McCoy, Mr. Scott."

"Hi there, Sulu, Messenger." "Good afternoon." "'Afternoon, you two."

The newcomers took their places in the remaining chairs as they performed the usual round of how-have-you-beens. The servator reappeared to give them their drinks. The moment it moved away, McCoy leaned forward and spoke quietly.

"Sulu, what's this about? It's dangerous arranging a meeting now, with the Shield getting so edgy."

"We've had no indication they're nervous enough to try monitoring every table in every bar on every Star Base. I assume you took precautions against being followed?"

"Of course." Scott sounded indignant.

"Then we should be reasonably safe. Kasindorf and Kebba are standing guard at both ends of this stretch. One of them will walk past the door if anyone happens along who shouldn't see us together."

The doctor relaxed a bit. "Smart thinking. Now, what's this 'vitally important information' you've found?"

"Paul found it. During our last overhaul at Star Base Three." Sulu took over the job of watching the entrance as the two Kongo officers looked to Messenger expectantly.

The record's officer lowered his pipe and studied it before speaking. "I suppose," he began conversationally, "that, in the course of your own 'excursions' through the Base files, you've come across references to an 'incident D'."

Two heads nodded affirmatively. "D'ya mean you found out what it means?" Scott asked eagerly.

"Yes. Dr. Wabisi deserves as much of the credit as I do. She was the one who correlated all the references and calculated when it occurred...2017.9, to be exact. Knowing that, I kept special look-out for files with that date, and finally located one in Star Base Three. My guess is it was marked for destruction, and through someone's oversight, or in the midst of a crisis at the Base, it got dumped into the Storage Area instead. I found it inside a disposal-cylinder, along with a number of earlier records. With them, and a little conjecturing, I pieced together a pretty complete picture of how the Rodinium Shield got to be what it is."

"It was first organized approximately a decade ago by Komack, the youngest Admiral in the Fleet at the time, and then Commodores Fitzpatrick and Fitzgerald. Their total number of operatives at that time was around thirty, scattered among the various ships and bases, rather like our own conspiracy today. The organization's original purpose was to decide when it might be necessary to employ 'irregular means' to defend Star Fleet's interests. The members most likely pictured themselves as protectors of the Federation. That's probably where they came up with the name 'Rodinium Shield'. At the start they committed only mild illegalities - bribery, rigging promotions and the like - to get a few treaties arranged, some mining contracts signed. Gradually they developed a dangerous fondness for manipulating events, and their methods became more heavy-handed; forgery, slander, breaking-and-entering. Even at that stage, they weren't much worse than the kind of crooked faction which tends to form inside every large bureaucracy. The real beginning of the Shield as we know it is marked by Incident D." Messenger paused, took a whiff on his pipe and exhaled pensively. "Ever hear of Dessrand?"

The question was rhetorical. Anyone with as much as grade-school knowledge of Galactic History knew of Dessrand: a small planet at the edge of Federation space, and the site of one of the most horrific wars ever chronicled. Within two months the entire population, over four billion humanoids, had been annihilated. Those who had escaped the weaponry perished in the subsequent epidemics. Alerted to the situation too late to save anything, Star Fleet had awarded Dessrand quarantine status out of respect for the dead. The planet still orbited that star the Dessrandians had called Tain, and few Fleet personnel, passing through that system, did not shudder at the sight of it.

McCoy and Scott looked at each other, the same premonition occurring to both. "Do you mean to say the Rodinium Shield had something to do with that war?" the doctor asked, as slowly and ominously as the beginning of a glacierial flow.

"That's what I mean to say."

The engineer shook his head disbelievingly. "Jus' when you think you couldn't possibly learn anithin' worse about them..."

"In fairness, I should point out that they didn't intend it to end the way it did. You may recall that, just prior to the beginning of the war, Star Fleet had been negotiating for the right to mine trititanium on the planet.

Dessrand's central government at that time was a dictatorship, and an abominable one, by anybody's standards. Scattered over the planet were also a number of break-away provinces, under the government of rebels intent on overthrowing the oppressive regime and establishing a democratic system. Accounts of the mining negotiations are hard to find now, buried as they are under more spectacular events, but the ones I've examined indicate that the rebellious sects were far more predisposed to the notion of selling their minerals than was the central government."

A sudden violent brawl at the other side of the cafe interrupted Messenger's narrative. As he waited for the racket to quiet down, Paul watched comprehension creep over the Kongo's officer's faces as they guessed the end of the story. "It doesn't take much imagination to reconstruct the sequence of events," Messenger finally continued. "One can speculate endlessly on the rationalizations they must have used: the trititanium was going to be used for the benefit of dozens of worlds besides Dessrand, the dictatorship was ripe for overthrow and was despicable enough to merit exception to the Prime Directive anyway, and so forth. In any event, the Rodinium Shield arranged for the rebellious factions to acquire a sizable proportion of Dessrand's weaponry. The assumption, apparently, was that once the material odds were in their favor, the rebels would be able to disband the dictatorship and establish a healthy democratic government without any more help from Star Fleet. But it didn't work out that way."

"That's the understatement of the century!" McCoy snarled.

"Sssssh!" warned Sulu. The noise had died down.

The record's officer went on. "As I mentioned, it was after this that the Shield went from bad to worse. The members could have acknowledged that what they'd been doing was wrong, confessed their involvement and gone to penal colonies for it. Instead, they elected to cover up their tracks. To do that, they had to commit a few other 'irregularities', and a few more to cover those, and then a few more - 'Oh, what a tangled web we weave', etc. - and, somewhere along the line, the process burned all sense of decency out of them.

"But their love of power hadn't been diminished an iota. So, after a brief interval to make certain their roles in Dessrand's Armageddon weren't going to be found out, most of the Shield-bearers resumed their former activities, becoming more unscrupulous every year and gathering new members from among those in Star Fleet with more ambition than integrity. As we know, the Rodinium Shield has now become big enough to be self-perpetuating. If it continues to grow at this rate, in another few years it may have no further use for secrecy, and then..." Paul bit down on the pipe stub, "who knows? Perhaps by then the Federation will be on its way to becoming another Klingon Empire."

"That isn't going to happen," McCoy promised. "Such a violation of the Prime Directive will get them convicted for certain. All we have to do is reveal that file to..."

"I'm afraid that won't do it," interrupted Sulu. "It's a typical Shield activity record; no names, just initials. What we've got to do is get hold of an account of that little piece of war-mongering with the names included."

"And I wouldn't count on finding one on any Star Base," Messenger added. "I'm sure the cylinder I found was intact only because Three's Records Department has the worst efficiency rating in the fleet. Knowing that was what gave me the idea of searching their storage bins. There's only one data-holding area in the Federation secure enough that the Shield might consider it safe to leave uncut Desserand files stored there."

"Star Fleet Command," Sulu finished. "And since the Eagle is just about to embark on a mission to Tholianis..."

"You want us to send word to Uhura for you," Scotty guessed.

"Correct."

"No problem at all," the doctor assured, smiling. Nowadays, it was hard to remember how difficult it used to be to pass instructions before the Vulcan Council joined their cause. The conspiracy's communications network was now solid enough to guarantee that Uhura would receive any message within four days. All one had to do was approach any Vulcan in Star Fleet, speak the code-word 'Phoenix' (the name of Kirk's ship), and they would be given any assistance required.

"The file-date is 2017.9," Messenger reminded. "And be sure to warn Uhura it's probably under special guard. They won't be keeping something like that in..." An urgent touch on his arm silenced him. He followed Sulu's stare to the doorway just in time to see a tall young black in an engineering uniform - Ensign Kebba - walking past.

The four conspirators immediately rose, exchanged hasty good-byes and wound their way out of the building. Scott and McCoy through the back way, Sulu and Messenger out the front.

It was good to emerge into the sunlight again. Even the shabby roadway looked refreshing after the cafe's mirk. Sulu inhaled deeply, feeling like he had not smelled fresh air in days.

"Hey you! Sulu, Paul! Hello, there!"

The officers turned to see a wide red shirt bearing down on them. *I might have known it would be sub-engineer Dreyfuss*, Sulu thought. *This neighborhood would be just to his taste.*

"I sure never expected to find you two in these parts!" Dreyfuss exclaimed as he strode up, smiling broadly. "What brings you here?"

Sulu shrugged. "A change of pace. We'd heard stories, about how Rarcon was a world away from the Fleet facilities. We wanted to have a look at it, just to fill our curiosity."

"My own, however, is full to the point of being bloated. I would prefer to return to the Eagle ... now." Messenger spoke with the strained patience of a man who has gone on a thoroughly unenjoyable excursion only out of deference to a friend.

"Run right along then, Paul. Sulu, how 'bout me giving you a private tour? Why, man, there's things to see in this place you wouldn't..."

"No, thanks, Dreyfuss." Sulu disengaged his arm from the engineer's grip. "I'm just about ready to return to the ship, too."

Dreyfuss wagged a finger in his superior officer's face. "You have no idea what you'll be missing!" he threatened cheerfully, and swaggered off down the narrow street. Uncharacteristically, Messenger glared after him with real disgust.

"Never mind, Paul," Sulu whispered as they started in the opposite direction. "The important thing is that he didn't suspect anything."

"It would have been better if he hadn't seen us at all. The moment he's back on board, the engineering section is going to ring with, 'You'll never guess who I met in Rarcon!'"

Sulu almost winced at the image. "At least we won't be giving them anything else to get curious about for awhile. This trip to Tholianis is going to be a three-week vacation from all conspiratorial activities."

"I can't imagine what we're going to do with all that leisure time, Sulu."

"Hmmm... Well, perhaps between your managing the Records Department and my duties as First Officer, we might use up enough time to... Oh, you're right, Paul. We're all going to go stir-crazy."



T'Prenn stood like a wading bird at rest, eyes closed, savoring the sun's warmth. The hottest part of Eskar's year had arrived, and for the first time since immigrating, she could bear to walk outside and let the temperature arouse memories of Kul-Shangk, on Vulcan, where she had spent her earliest years.

The Eskarian sun had just reached its flame-white apex, making the ranks of pink foliage shimmer in the heat like algae swaying at the bottom of a sea grotto. All animal life had gone into hiding, leaving silence over the desert, save for the sounds of the children. T'Prenn often brought T'Pryr, T'Parin, and James out with her so that they might experience, at least vicariously, something of what their ancestral home was like. They were busy tending the hemlock grove now. The human, Kirk, usually enjoyed that task, but he had very little time for it these days.

T'Prenn opened her eyes to check on their progress. T'Parin was explaining to two-year-old James how to uproot a skaykoth sprout. T'Pryr was handling the more demanding task of pruning the trees; shaping their ragged forms into neat green triangles with the same effortless, graceful efficiency she applied to any task. She had inherited that tendency from her father, along with those widely spaced eyes, and that indomitable set of the jaw.

As frequently happened when she had been watching T'Pryr, T'Prenn found herself thinking of her first bondmate, Shalkam, and the old grief and uncertainty flared again, like the flames from his flyer's crash-site. Tho the grief had lost its cutting edge, the uncertainty was destined to remain forever. Shalkam had been too proud to live on Vulcan with anything less than his original social standing - had he been too proud to live with less anywhere? T'Prenn found it difficult to believe he could have violated Surak's Reverence-for-Life Doctrine, which expressly forbade suicide, yet Shalkam had known that flyer was in need of repair. It was possible he had blocked that knowledge from his conscious mind, as a way of solving his problem without rejecting his ethics. T'Prenn would never know for sure, but she had learned to live with the mystery.

There were other memories. Even as the trauma of bond-severance had worn off, T'Prenn had been assaulted by another anguish: the manner of Shalkam's death barred her from any hope of returning to Vulcan. Illogical or not, she could not bear to go before the Vulcan Bureau of Immigration and face questions she could not answer about her husband's demise. Thru that same time, T'Prenn had gradually realized the need for her to remarry. T'Pryr was approaching adolescence, a time of life when the steadyng influence of a father-figure was crucial to the development of a normal Vulcan personality. Still, T'Prenn could not bring herself to actively search for a husband. It had been by chance that she had encountered a young Vulcan, recently arrived in Lindolan, with a face very like Shalkam's... and in the advanced throes of the Pon Farr. T'Prenn had instantly recognized the uncontrollable trembling of his hands as he fought to keep his voice steady, his careful choice of courteous words ill-concealing his desperation. Perhaps it had been a subconscious desire to atone for her husband's possible malefaction by herself saving a life, which had made her ignore her inner voice - warning that only for the most serious of crimes would the Council have sent a Vulcan away from his world in this condition. She had merely ascertained that he had not been exiled for infringement of the Life-Reverence Doctrine before accepting his proposition - much to her regret some hours later, when she learned she had bound herself to one of the most notorious criminals modern Vulcan had ever produced. It was the suddenness of that discovery which had done the damage, creating an estrangement between them which had prevented their relationship from becoming anything other than coldly impersonal.

In time, T'Prenn had come to accept, if not enjoy, her situation, for Spock's behavior had never given her any reminder of his malversation. She could only theorize he must have resolved to live the rest of his life impeccably in penance for his one great error. But he had made no effort to alter their relationship - busying himself, instead, with his export business and his exhaustive preparations for the arrival of his former captain.

From the very beginning of their marriage, T'Prenn had had to accept that the human would be moving in with them as soon as he had completed his penitentiary sentence. Only once during that interval had she been given any clue to Spock's private torment; when the strain he had been living under brought on a second Pon Farr, years ahead of schedule. He had thawed briefly then, expressing sorrow over their inability to form a mind meld with each other, and the aching loneliness that filled his life. But the next morning he had become his cool, distant self again and had remained so until the human came.

T'Prenn had always anticipated that event with a mixture of curiosity and dread, wondering what sort of man could have had such a hold on Spock, and perceiving Kirk as a connection to her husband's less stable past. It had been to avenge his captain's court-martial, so the stories told, that Spock had violated his oath. Would their reunion cause him to revert back to his original character, capable of committing such an act?

It had been no small relief to find her apprehensions unfounded. The human's arrival had affected only subtle changes in Spock: he had become less tense and restless, as though he were more content with his circumstances. T'Prenn was still in the process of becoming acquainted with Kirk, but she had quickly decided he was not the 'imperialistic egoist' rumors painted him to be. He had very soon learned to adapt to his new environment, been a soothing influence on Spock, and invariably respectful to herself and the children, and so, for a short while, their household had become more relaxed... until the conspiracy was formed.

For a long time T'Prenn had neither known, nor cared to know, what was actually going on, for she regarded anything connected with her husband's Star Fleet career as strictly his own business. All she'd gathered was that Spock, the human, and a number of their past colleagues were engaging in some clandestine activities related to Spock's and Kirk's court-martials.

She got her first inkling of how important these activities were when Spock's father, a voluntary exile, joined their efforts. For this reason he had returned to Vulcan to endure the very thing Shalkam had never dared face. Even more thought-provoking were the indications that Sarek had first formed a Kaythan-Velm bond with his son - with himself in the subordinate status. T'Prenn would have expected it to be the other way around. She concluded there had to be some aspect to their mutual disgrace of which she was unaware, if Sarek felt he had wronged Spock. The full revelation had finally come on that night when Spock had entered her room with a message scroll from the Vulcan Council...

It still shook her inwardly to remember reading it; Spock, declared void of guilt, she and her family free to return home any time they wished. And her own reaction... She supposed she ought to be ashamed of having committed such flagrantly emotional behavior, but she was not, because that night had repaid everything their first two matings had lacked. More than that, her perception of their life together - past, present, and especially future - had been irrevocably altered. For the first time since Shalkam's disgrace, she knew a sense of pride and purpose... and an entirely new set of anxieties.

Since their reconciliation, Spock had told her about the Rodinium Shield and their efforts against it - enough to make her appreciate that Spock and Kirk were involved in a superlatively dangerous undertaking. They were fighting an opponent capable of destroying not only the conspirators, but her own family as well. That possibility sometimes aroused her primal protective instinct, making her want to urge Spock to abandon this perilous endeavor and learn to be content with what he still had. However, her more rational self always disciplined those feelings, recognizing the conspiracy's work as more important than herself, Spock, or even the children. Its success or failure would determine the course of the entire Federation for centuries to come.

In any event, she doubted she would be able to talk Spock out of it. He was doing this for the Human, more than anything else. Their's was the most powerful friendship T'Prenn had ever witnessed, and she was grateful to Kirk for that. She now knew it had kept Spock alive through times when he had had no other reason to live. That her own aloofness had contributed to his suffering was a source of deep regret for T'Prenn. However, that was in the past now. There was nothing to prevent their future life together from being everything they both wanted it to be, if only this war against the Rodinium Shield would soon end.

T'Prenn was stirred from her reflections by the sound of the door opening, and the object of her thoughts emerged. Spock, too, found the late-summer weather pleasant.

T'Prenn nodded a greeting. Spock returned it automatically, but his eyes were on T'Parin, who was presently making use of the calming projection he had taught her. A small blue and yellow lymlf had been flushed from the hemlock's inner boughs by the pruning-laser's buzz, and was perched on a branchtip, two of its four wings raised in alarm. Yet, it remained still as T'Parin moved closer, her jaw clenched with concentration. She extended a hand, and the brightly-feathered creature obediently perched on her finger, wings settling. As the projection took full effect, T'Parin tilted her head to one side, a glint of delight visible in her normally serious brown eyes. Then, noticing her father's scrutiny, she extended the lymlf toward him to demonstrate how well she had applied his instructions. Spock only nodded acknowledgment, but T'Prenn felt his inner glow of satisfaction. It was rare for the calming projection to be mastered at such an early age.

After letting her brother have a good look at the lymlf, T'Parin returned the little animal to the branches, with an additional assurance that it would be safe there, and resumed James' weeding lesson. Spock settled on the doorstep to watch, folding his hands over one knee. After a moment, T'Prenn sat down next to him.

T'Parin selected a small skaykoth sprout and demonstrated the correct way to uproot it, rocking the sprout in a circular motion to snap the side rootlets until the plant bent 45 degrees, then pulling out the long taproot. Tossing the weed out of the grove, she told James to try, and lifted an eyebrow in exact imitation of her father's mannerism when James marched over to a skaykoth nearly as tall as himself. Her mouth opened, but shut again as she apparently decided to let her brother find out for himself.

James grasped the smooth stalk between chubby fists and pushed. Nothing happened. He shifted his grip and pulled, putting all his weight into it, and the plant bent slightly under the assault. Encouraged, the small boy repeated the sequence over and over, making up in determination what he lacked in expertise. His audience watched intently as the skaykoth slowly came loose. Even T'Pryr emerged from behind the hemlocks to witness the final phase, as James wrapped his arms around the now misshapen stalk and tugged the tapering pink root from the sandy soil.

"Your son grows strong," T'Prenn commented softly.

"Indeed," Spock replied, glancing curiously at his wife. This was the first time he had ever heard her refer to James with those words.

"Your daughter, also. This morning T'Parin moved the Sho-Kion plant across the living area for me, with no assistance."

This time Spock made no reply, suspecting that T'Prenn must be leading up to something. It was unlike her to speak to him outside of necessity. He had hoped their new understanding might change that. While he had Jim to talk with, there were times when he desired to converse with another Vulcan. Unfortunately, the chance did not occur, and Spock had concluded his wife must be, by nature, uncommunicative.

T'Prenn noticed his silence. "You appear troubled. Is there some problem with your business...or the conspiracy?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. T'Prenn had never expressed any interest in the conspiracy before. "No. Is something troubling you?"

His wife seemed uncharacteristically hesitant, studying the hands clasped in her lap. "I...have a request to make of you, Husband."

It was a time for directness, Spock decided. "State it."

T'Prenn lifted her head to meet his gaze. "I wish you to give your family name to our children."

Spock quickly averted his eyes. He hadn't expected anything of this sort. "To what purpose?"

"They should learn pride in their ancestry. Your family - and theirs - is one of Vulcan's great families - directly descended from Surak. That should not be hidden from them."

Spock made no immediate answer. He continued to watch the children. James had dragged his skaykoth from the grove and left it next to T'Parin's, and was now attempting to uproot an even bigger plant. Clearly, the boy already found stimulation in challenges. Spock remembered such a trait in his own early childhood, and how Sarek had taught him to make the most constructive use of it. Spock had always intended to pass that lesson on to James, but it was difficult to find opportunities. He had been kept so busy with his export business and now the conspiracy, it left him little time to take part in his children's education, excepting an occasional short lesson or explanation.

Yesterday evening had been one of those pleasant exceptions. Spock had been sitting beside the large window in the living room, going over financial records, when T'Parin and James had come in to look at the unusually brilliant sunset - gold, pink and pale green striations covering nearly half the sky. On impulse, Spock had taken the time to explain it to them - how, as the sun's rays passed through the atmosphere at the widest possible angle, suspended particles altered the wavelengths, producing the bright colors they were seeing. He remembered T'Parin's open fascination, and how James, though not understanding everything being said, had obviously enjoyed listening.

Most significantly, Spock recalled catching a glance from T'Prenn on the periphery of his vision. It had been too brief for him to be sure, but her eyes - directed at him, not the children - had contained something very much like tenderness. She may not even have meant him to see it. There may have been many other glances he had missed over these past several months.

As he had done so often before, Spock tried to reason what, besides the obvious, had changed between T'Prenn and himself. It had started that evening he had shared the Vulcan Council's reply with her. Though well aware of what anguish her own state of exile caused her, he had been completely unprepared for how - the word would not be denied - joyfully, she had reacted. So much so, he had responded in kind. For a single night in their lives, the behavior of one Vulcan and one half-Vulcan had been indistinguishable from that of two humans in love - an episode which had shaken to the foundations Spock's long certainty that no type of meaningful relationship could ever exist between himself and his wife.

Perhaps that was what had changed. He had come to disbelieve his own indifference. Indifferent was the last word for what they had been to each other through those hours.

T'Prenn shifted her position, reminding Spock that she was still waiting for his answer.

"Have you considered the implications of what you are asking, T'Prenn? Vulcan now denounces my family name. My shame should not be visited upon our children."

T'Prenn's tone was grave; completely sincere. "That is of no consequence. I have come to know the truth of your innocence, and shall teach it to our children, so that no one else's belief will matter."

"Even so, would it not be preferable to wait until my name has been restored to honor?"

"Are you close to achieving the goals of your conspiracy, then?"

Spock hesitated, not wanting to give T'Prenn more cause for optimism than the situation merited. "The possibility of failure will exist up to, and including, the very last phase. However, at present, the prospect of success is better than seventy percent."

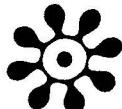
T'Prenn considered for a long moment. "We will put off the naming, then, until after the conspiracy has come to fruition," she finally agreed. Spock felt a special satisfaction in having the matter settled. This was the first time they had ever made a mutual decision.

T'Parin finally came forward to assist James with his hopeless task of uprooting the big skaykoth. Between the two of them, the plant rapidly came loose, and together they carried it to the weed pile, swinging it triumphantly.

T'Prenn looked up at the sun to check the time. "Kirk will be returning from his delivery run within one point three hours. I must prepare his repast," she announced. As she rose in a graceful motion, she offered her bondmate the two-finger embrace. Spock, surprised but gratified, returned it, and felt the mental affirmation flow through the point of contact;

//Husband, your battles, on whatever field, are also mine.//

Their eyes met. Almost as though for the first time, Spock realized how beautiful hers were; deep, black and shining, like polished selenka stone... Then she turned and entered the house, leaving him alone to enjoy the sunlight and watch the children, and to muse over all the changes that had come into his life.



Admiral Komack looked up from the mission report of Starship Exeter to frown at his insistently buzzing intercom. With a curt gesture he snapped it open. "Who's there?"

"Adiarte. Admiral, I've got to talk to you right now."

Komack's eyebrows drew together. Even from Adiarte, such insolence was totally unprecedented. Without a word, the admiral activated his door release.

Commander Adiarte strode across the room, a cassette in one hand. Making no acknowledgement of his superior's fierce glare, he leaned purposefully across the desk top. "Admiral, do you recall our conversation of 8 months ago, when I reported there were indications of spying in Star Fleet?"

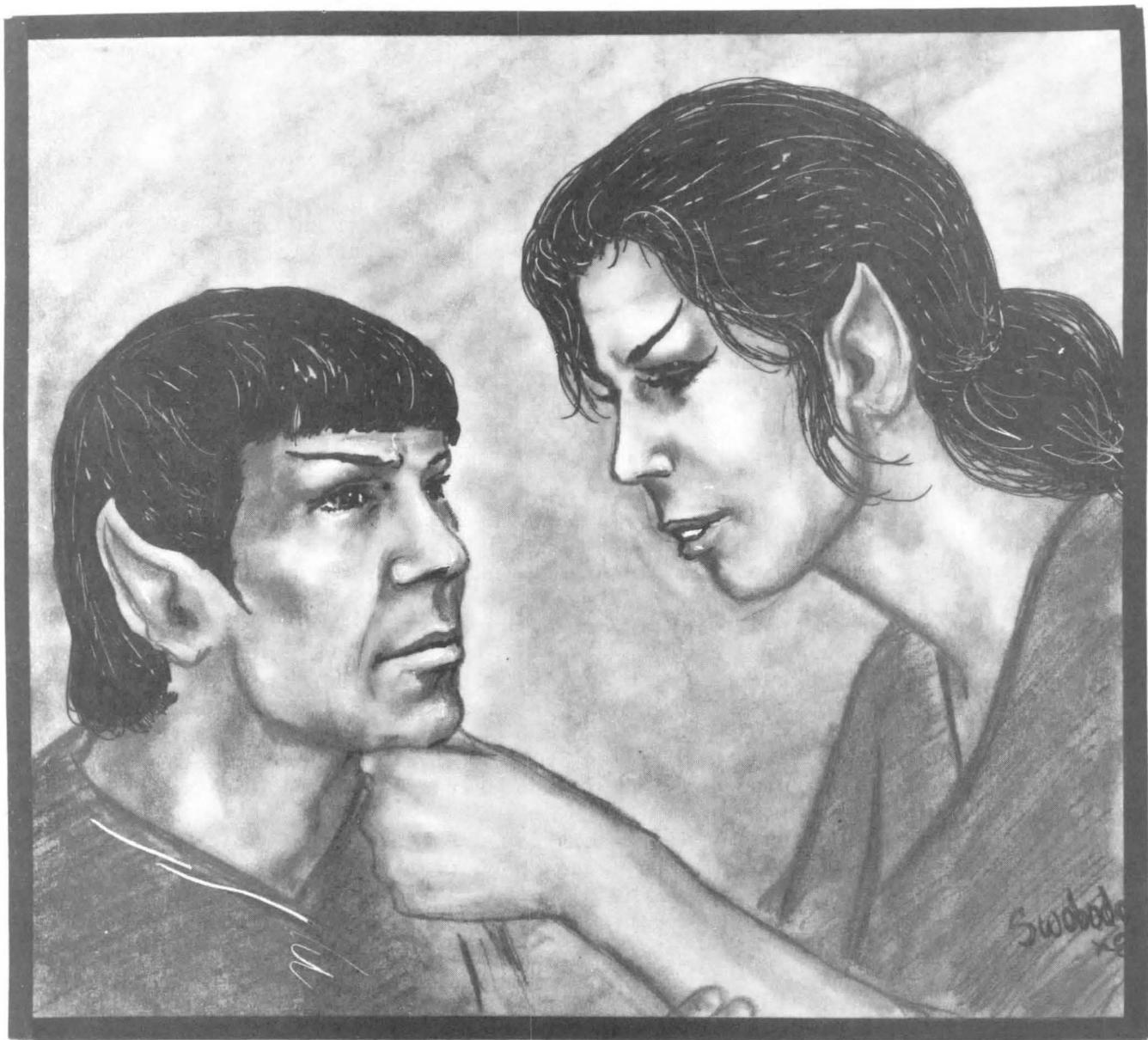
"Yes," Komack replied, his voice dangerously low.

Adiarte hefted the cassette dramatically. "Within this hour, I've discovered evidence that we've got at least one spy on this base."

Komack scowled - an expression he reflexively employed whenever confronted by an unexpected and unpleasant situation. "Elaborate on that."

"I'd be delighted." Adiarte displayed calculated anger, compensating himself for the scorn with which he had been treated during their last meeting. "I was going through the Beta 400 files, looking for figures on last year's mineral quotas, when I noticed one of the tapes slightly out of line. I was about to push it back into place when I saw the date." Adiarte turned the cassette so that Komack could read the label. It was the record of the Shield's original mining negotiations. "I was curious about who'd had occasion to look at this particular tape so I checked the borrowing logs. No one has had any authorization to read this tape since it was put in the files, so I took it down to the labs for testing. Guess what I found?"

"I do not enjoy guessing games, Commander. State your findings," Komack ordered, but his voice lacked its usual edge.



Adiarte let the cassette clatter to the desk top for emphasis. "The degree of alpha decay on the surface indicates this tape is less than two years old a duplicate."

Komack found it necessary to shift his glare from Adiarte to the cassette, for fear his disconcernment would show. The commander obviously felt no compulsion to hide his own as he went on dramatically. "Only one group of people in the Federation - hell, in the whole galaxy - has access to the equipment necessary for this kind of duplication work. The spy has to be someone in our own records department. And the devil only knows how many other tapes they could have copied by now! It'll take years to go through all the records, to find out which ones have been tampered with, and how much they've learned about..."

"Adiarte, make some effort to control yourself. Shouting is purposeless." Komack had thought the situation through and finally decided to risk speaking, knowing his voice would be calm enough to conceal that he had experienced a moment's uncertainty.

The commander was gratifyingly flustered by his superior's imperturbability. "Admiral, don't you realize what this could mean? It was bad enough when we thought only starbase records were being read. Now we're talking about the Command-Base records, where we keep everything! They could be learning enough about the Shield to put us all away for..."

"Would it astonish you, Commander, to learn this isn't the first time we've been under that threat?

The younger man's mouth dropped open, making any verbal reply extraneous.

"Ah, yes." Komack leaned back in his chair with an air of supreme self-satisfaction. "It's happened before several times, as a matter of fact. The first time was about eight years ago. One of the Shield's original members, Commodore Samual Nybakken - friend of mine, and the best forger we ever had..." The Admiral's eyes became distant for a few seconds, remembering a past separated from him by more than time.

"But he went sour on the Shield after Dessrand. For months afterward he raved at me to disband the organization. Used to say things like, 'The Rodinium Shield has become a gangrenous tissue in the body of Star Fleet, end it before the rottenness spreads too far to treat.' Nybakken always had been one for dramatics, but luckily for the rest of us, he never had any head for strategy. Almost overnight, he got quiet again; even asked me if I needed him for any more forgering, and I smelled a rotten scent there. So I appointed him Star Fleet representative at the Second Venician Conference, and while he was attending that, I sent one of our Special Assignment Teams to search his house. They found he'd acquired a stack of accounts of Shield endeavors: Dessrand, the Erstrav-Hutton incident, and your mining negotiations, among others. I know I don't have to tell you, none of his efforts ever came to anything."

"What did you...?" Adiarte broke off. He suddenly remembered hearing reports, while serving as a security guard aboard the Potempkin, regarding one of their representatives at the Venician Conference who had begun to reveal

manifestations of a mental disorder and was committed to the Tantalus Colony. Other reports had followed - about how his problem had been diagnosed as emerging memories of long-suppressed childhood traumas. After standard treatment to rearrange his memory patterns, he had been quietly retired to civilian life. But, as the whole Federation now knew, memory-treatments at Tantalus had not been standard.

"And then there was Captain James Kirk's first courtmartial," Komack went on, pretending to ignore Adiarte's expression of horrified fascination. "Of course you remember him: once considered the best captain in the fleet, and the most likely to obtain the post of Fleet Admiral and put a gaping hole in our organization's power structure. We got rid of him after that tragic event at Ursula."

"But our first chance came a lot earlier: 2949, when Kirk misplaced one of his crewmen in an ion storm. I made certain our Commodore Stone was put in charge of the courtmartial proceedings. Before the actual trial began, I sent him a stargram telling him that it would be in the best interests of the Service, as well as of the Shield, to have Kirk slammed down hard. Somewhere between my office and Star Base Eleven, an error by one of the 'gram servicers changed the E on Stone's name to an F, which wouldn't have mattered under normal circumstances. But, by one of those disconcerting historical coincidences which still occur every century or so, the Intrepid I, under the command of Captain Stonf, happened to be at Starbase Eleven at the time.

"Subsequently, I received a communication from Stonf, informing me that there was no logical purpose in presenting my opinions to him since he was not involved in Kirk's trial and, incidentally, wanting to know what I had meant by 'the Shield'. In my answering message I explained the error and identified 'the Shield' as a personal matter between Stone and myself. However, lest it occur to him to wonder what kind of personal matter between two officers in the upper echelons could benefit from the discharge of a starship captain, I alerted my people to keep special watch on the Intrepid's crew."

"It wasn't long before I started getting reports: discreet inquiries were being made about 'the Shield' - what it was, what it did. Dealing with that situation presented special difficulties. The usual methods of shutting someone up - intimidation, blackmail and/or bribery - simply could not be employed. These were Vulcans: notoriously unresponsive to threats - and possessing that renowned, unbreachable integrity. The lesson I finally learned from that experience is one I hope you will take to heart; people like that are the ones you want to put in charge of those more demanding missions...such as investigating why the entire Gamma 7-A system suddenly went silent..."

The Admiral smiled inwardly. Adiarte looked like he were in a mild state of shock, his assertive streak so intimidated that Komack doubted he would be hearing much from it anytime soon.

"No, Commander, I wouldn't spend much time worrying about this spy." Komack sat up straight again. "In fact, you don't have to concern yourself at all. I'll handle it from this point on."

"Yes, sir," Adiarte responded meekly.

"Go to Admirals Fitzgerald and Fitzpatrick now and give them a full report...and be inconspicuous about it, this time. Our spy must not suspect we're aware of anything out of the ordinary."

Adiarte nodded. "Sir, there's got to be more than one. Those break-ins at the base files..."

"I realize that. But if this is handled properly, we will need only to get hold of one of them and the rest will follow. Dismissed."

And you're just the one who'd know how to handle it, all right, Adiarte considered, still stunned, as he left the Admiral's office.

Komack activated his desk-computer terminal before the door had closed on the commander's retreating form. "List of all personnel with direct access to the Command-Base files and duplicating equipment."

Two columns of names shimmered into existence on the screen. The Admiral studied them for several minutes, then opened his intercom and instructed the receptionist to activate the Snoop-Proofer and signal the head of the Records Department.

"Commodore Vardakis here," a liquid voice responded, seconds later.

"Komack. Rowean, I'm very disappointed in you."

"There's nothing in Base regulations requiring me to be available every night of the week, Matthew."

"Not about that. About the fact that it took Adiarte to stumble across a duplicated tape in your files and figure out there's a mole among your subordinates."

For a moment Vardakis was silent. When she spoke again, her voice was deathly cold. "I'll take care of it, Admiral. Just tell me who it is."

"That is what I'm counting on you to find out. Start by checking everyone in your section for any history of subversive activity."

"It will come out negative. All record department personnel are well screened before they begin work here."

"Then one of them's developed treasonable tendencies more recently, perhaps motivated by resentment over one of your infamous reprimands, or loyalty to a previous commander. Your Lt. Liker was once an associate of Captain Driscoll, if I remember correctly. And Lt. Commander Uhura served under Captain Kirk."

"Come to think of it, I've overhead Lt. Commander Gissepp making remarks about Star Fleet getting 'bad at the core'."

"Start keeping a special eye on all your underlings - those three in particular. I'll station a security team in your office. If anyone starts poking around those certain files without authorization, or operates the duplicator without permission, have him hauled straight to the brig. Got it?"

"Got it."

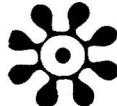
"This will probably be the most important job you'll ever do for the Shield, Rowean. Come through for me and I'll have you promoted to Rear-Admiral."

The Commodore's voice abruptly warmed. "I certainly got that. See you at 1700, Matthew."

"See you, Fireball. Komack out."

The Admiral snapped off the speaker. After a thoughtful moment, he opened his smallest desk drawer and lifted out an outdated Pass Card - the one his former friend, Nybakken, had used to gain access to the Shield's files. The task force Komack had sent to rifle Nybakken's home had delivered the card to him the following morning.

Komack turned the little rectangle over in his hands. Almost regretfully, he murmured, "Sam...you idealist. I really, really thought you had more intelligence. You, of all people, should have known you would never be able to pull it off." The Admiral's eyes hardened like water at absolute zero as they came to rest on Adiarte's cassette, still lying innocently on his desk top. "And neither," he added, addressing his unknown antagonists, "are you."



The repair-laser's whine echoed the length of the docking bay as Captain Kirk soldered the last circuit back together. Finally straightening his back, he ran a tricorder over the Phoenix's wing, and nodded with satisfaction at the confirmation that he had reconnected everything properly. Then he adjusted the setting on his laser's beam and proceeded to close the hole in the outer plating. That task was soon completed - little of the metal was missing, just torn and bent out of place. It was the nose of the vessel which had taken the worst hit from the border guard's barrage. Kirk glanced over his shoulder to where Spock was crouched beside the much larger hole in the freighter's bow, going over the interior with a scanner and micro-welder. "How bad, Spock?"

The Vulcan kept his attention focused on his work. "There appears to be no irreparable damage to the guidance mechanism. Had the center of impact occurred even a few meters closer, you almost certainly would not have been able to navigate home."

To the human's experienced eye, Spock was still exuding cold, unstated anger - rather like that of a father whose son had done something inexcusably foolhardy. Kirk closed the final seam, and turned to face the Vulcan. The hour was late, and the two of them were alone in the bay. Spock's other

pilots and mechanics were not all privy to what Spock considered his private life, of which James Kirk was a part. Consequently, disagreements of any type between Spock and his Chief Partner/Pilot/Friend were never aired in public.

"Spock, maybe it will clear the air if you just come right out and say it was stupid of me to fly a recovery mission all the way to Beta S without telling you."

Spock finally looked at him, his expression still sub-freezing. "You hardly need me to tell you that, Captain."

Jim sighed and bent to gather his own tools. "All right, then; I'll say it. It was totally illogical for me to go that far into Federation Space to retrieve a single missive, at the risk of the Phoenix and her crew as well as myself. I might add that, from a strictly practical viewpoint, our whole endeavor is equally illogical; saturated with risk from beginning to end. Besides," he continued with special conviction, "it could have turned out to be the Desserand account. Wouldn't it have been worth taking an even greater chance to get that file secured?"

The Vulcan glared a moment longer before finally wavering. "Perhaps. Tho I'll not endorse your failure to report back, your desire to secure the missive may have been justifiable. I was only..."

"Worried?" Kirk grinned mischievously. His friend dropped his eyes, almost shyly, and gave a confirming near-smile. Glad to have the matter out of the way. Jim ducked under the fuselage to join Spock and assist with the repair of the mangled bulkhead.

"Anyway, it's just as well it was only one message," he added more lightly as he spread out his equipment. "Have you looked inside our compartment lately? There's hardly room in there for two more paper sheets!"

"You would seem to be difficult to satisfy, Jim. Your complaint sixteen months ago was that it was not full enough."

"Back then, I was worried that we were never going to get anywhere. Now, I'm appalled."

Spock deactivated the scanner for a moment, visualizing the hidden compartment as he had last seen it: closely packed with slips of plasticine and microfilm, each one of which represented a misdeed by some Star Fleet or Federation official. "It would seem to fulfill the definition of 'appalling', if I understand the term correctly."

"You understand it, my friend." Kirk began clearing away burnt wiring in preparation for reattaching a sensor unit. "What I don't understand is how the Shield managed to do all that without leaking any word of it to the rest of the Fleet."

"Quite probably, much of it did leak and was simply ignored. I have observed, the general attitude among humans seems to be that some unsavory elements are inevitable in any large bureaucracy."

"That's one attitude that's going to change in a hurry when we get this exposed."

Spock lifted a bemused eyebrow. "'When', not 'if'?"

"When. That's right." Kirk grinned wolfishly. "When Uhura gets hold of that Dessrand paper, we'll be just about ready to pounce."

Spock allowed his eyes to betray answering enthusiasm over such a prospect. For a few seconds a heavy sense of comraderie flowed between them, like that of two travelers near the end of a very long journey.

The moment was interrupted by the distant hum of the conveyor belt, echoing hollowly through the vast chamber room. Someone was approaching the docking bay. Spock's face reflexively assumed its normal, expressionless mask.

Within a minute the conveyor reached its destination, and the passenger - a tall, regal figure in black - stepped down and approached the Phoenix's berth. T'Prenn nodded at Kirk, then handed a complex metallic cylinder to Spock. "I have completed all repairs on this sensor unit, Husband."

"My gratitude, T'Prenn," Spock replied gravely as he reached for the glittering object. Kirk was only watching them casually - it was by chance he saw the way their hands brushed as the unit was passed. Only a momentary gesture, but one that caught his full attention. He could not recall ever seeing such a deliberate touch between them before.

T'Prenn left without another word and Spock immediately began to reconnect the sensor to the ship's power lines, but Kirk continued to regard him quizzically. A lot of small changes Jim had barely noticed were suddenly clicking into place: the way Spock's nocturnal wanderings had slackened off recently, the fact that Spock no longer went off on business trips every time Kirk was away with the Phoenix...

The Vulcan became aware of scrutiny, and mirrored Kirk's stare. The captain smiled quietly and looked away, knowing he might well be infringing on a personal matter. He asked carefully, "Spock, has something... happened recently... between you and T'Prenn?"

Spock seemed surprised, but not resentful. "Why do you ask, Jim?"

"I just noticed. You've been behaving differently toward T'Prenn, and she toward you. I'd always sensed ... looking at you two, it was as if there was a wall between you. Now it doesn't seem to be there anymore."

It was Spock's turn to scrutinize his companion, setting his repair laser aside. "Your observational capacities are uncommonly well-developed, Jim," he commented. "And the metaphor you employed is entirely apt. An enstraining misconception has been eliminated. T'Prenn no longer believes that I am Dreelfshant - an oath-breaker."

Kirk felt as though a long-borne burden had suddenly been lifted from him. "You mean that's what your problem has been all this time?"

"You sound relieved."

"I guess I am. It was probably self-centered of me, but I always worried that my presence here was the problem." Another thought brought a frown to his face. "But how could she have held that against you after what she..." Kirk stopped, remembering he had no idea what T'Prenn had done.

Spock quickly second-guessed his train of thought. "Her own offense was much less serious than mine. In fact, it was not really hers as much as it was her husband's."

Kirk's curiosity was aroused. "Would it be a breach of confidence for you to tell me about it?"

"Not any longer." Spock hefted the laser and resumed attaching the sensor unit as he talked. "T'Prenn's first bondsman was Shalkam, formerly the owner of one of the most prestigious agricultural equipment manufacturing companies on Vulcan. Nine years ago a series of unfortunate events left his financial empire in severe economic straits. In an attempt to recover, he arranged some commercial dealings with several Klingon-allied organizations, in violation of the Federation Trade Accords. When this was discovered, the Vulcan Council offered Shalkam the choice of exile, or remaining on Vulcan with reduced personal status. He would accept no lesser position than that which he'd become accustomed to, so he chose exile."

"Is it the Vulcan way to punish people for what their spouses do?"

"No. But, unfortunately, it is sometimes unavoidable. T'Prenn's offense was that she had known of the illicit activities and failed to report them. For such a crime she need only have paid a fine. However, she had been Shalkam's wife through three mating-cycles, and it would have been dangerous to her sanity to try to sever their bond after so long a period. This is why she left with him. There was no other logical choice."

"I see. Spock, how do you feel about her 'crime'?"

"I am in no position to blame her, since I, too, have been known to subordinate my planet's standards for the sake of a personal loyalty." Spock's eyes met Kirk's meaningfully, and this time it was Jim who felt pleasantly abashed. "However, the core of T'Prenn's personal honor has never been breached - she retains in full our traditional abhorrence for oath-breakers."

"Then why did she marry you?"

"Because she did not realize who I was when we first met. 'Spock' is not an especially uncommon name among our people. She saw me only as a better prospect for a husband than anyone else she had met on Eskar. Cultural conditioning probably influenced her decision as well. From a very early age, Vulcan women are indoctrinated to assume a submissive status during the Time-of-Mating. We do not do this to subjugate our females, as humans have been known to, but because the survival of our males, and thus our species, depends

on a woman's acquiescence during the mating. Therefore, realizing my condition, T'Prenn felt obligated to cooperate with me without making any inquiries into my past. It was our 'wedding night' that she discovered I was Spock Drelfshant."

Kirk recognized that he had been given a glimpse of Vulcan private life almost never offered to off-worlders, and his next question was cautious. "But didn't she also find out it wasn't true, that you knew you hadn't..."

"She could not probe deeply enough," Spock replied with something like a sigh of regret. "I cannot explain in detail what occurred, English lacks the terminology. Suffice to say that the shock of suddenly realizing what she had become linked to created... a mental barrier. It might have been prevented if I had told her beforehand who I was, but I was in no condition to think of doing so - far too advanced in the fever. Consequently, we have never been able to link minds in all the years since, which is essential among Vulcans to the development of a permanent union and a normal matrimonial relationship. And I had no motivation to correct the situation. T'Prenn saw to our children, and fulfilled my needs when they arose. That was all I required of her. It was not until an outside factor, the Council's acceptance of our report, convinced her I was not Drelfshant that the 'barrier' dissipated."

Kirk discreetly refrained from asking Spock how he had discovered that the barrier was gone. Instead, he smiled warmly. "Then everything's all right between you now?"

"That depends on precisely what you mean by 'all right'. T'Prenn and I have much time to make up for. But, yes, the prospect is that eventually ours shall become an enduring bond."

"I'm happy for you, Spock," Kirk said, and he meant it, but he could not quite subdue a twinge of... not exactly worry, but, concern, over what this could mean to his own relationship with Spock. "Will you be taking her back to Vulcan then, when all this is over?"

His voice must have revealed more than he had meant it to, because Spock replied with a reassuring tone. "We do both wish to return to Vulcan some day, Jim, but never permanently. I have realized, and have made T'Prenn understand, that I have no desire to be separated from you for any length of time, ever again."

"Don't let me stand in the way of your happiness, Spock. If T'Prenn wants to live on Vulcan again, and you do, too... well, I think I could eventually get used to a vegetarian diet."

"And to 49 degrees* in the shade...during the winter?"

"Erm... That would take a little more adjusting to, all right. But, Spock, the point is that I don't want to be the one thing holding you back from anything you want to do."

* measurement in Celcius, equivalent to 120 degrees Fahrenheit

"Nor would I intentionally interfere with your plans, Jim."

"You don't have to worry about that. I haven't made any yet. I've been giving all my attention to finishing our business with the Rodinium Shield." Kirk's brow furrowed in thought for a moment. "I'll agree with you on one thing, though: we can't ever be separated again."

"I assume, also, that you will not be returning to Star Fleet?"

"No... no, it wouldn't be the same. Not after all that's happened." Kirk sighed inwardly and accepted the final closing of that door, once so bright. "Other than that, I'm really not sure what I want."

"Perhaps, if you did, we could decide on some mutually beneficial plan," Spock offered.

"Good suggestion." Deciding to forget the repairs for now, Kirk leaned back against the bulkhead and settled into serious consideration of his future. "I do want to stay in space. Always have and always will, I guess. If we transplanted your company into the Federation, where we could visit Vulcan and Earth as much as we wanted ... Except, I'm a little bored with delivery runs. Maybe we could set up an independent scouting service. I think a lot of our friends are going to want to leave the Fleet when the conspiracy's over. They could join us. And your father. And if we found some class M planet with a climate we could all live with, we could get a colonization permit and settle there. With your financial resources we could make it into whatever we wanted - all of us, on our own world! You could bring your family there, too, and I'll..." Kirk's increasingly enthusiastic musings were interrupted, this time by the sound of the craft elevator descending from the roof. As it came level with the docking bay, Spock glanced over the Phoenix's nose to check on who was arriving. His sudden change of posture to a stance of attentive readiness alerted Kirk, who immediately moved to his side. The new arrival was a shuttlecraft... the Methenvar's. The vehicle docked hastily, and Almarine Driscoll leaped out, sprinting toward the conveyor belt.

"Alma!" Kirk called out. She whirled, caught sight of them, and ran to their berth, eyes urgent, hair flying, as close to distraught as either man had ever seen her. Thoroughly alarmed, Kirk nearly dashed forward to demand what had happened, but Spock spoke first.

"Report, Commander." The Vulcan had clamped an impervious mask over his face and voice - a sure indication that he expected the news to be devastating.

His calm seemed to steady Driscoll, who drew herself up to near attention, old disciplines asserting themselves. "The Methenvar received an emergency message via the Intrepid II three hours ago. I started for Eskar the minute we received it." She inhaled deeply. "Uhura has been arrested."

to be continued.....



BLURBS

CONTACT - By Popular request, Contact is planning to reprint issues #2 through 7 (limited print run of each will be determined by number of pre-orders) summer 1984. For date of availability and price, SASE to Bev Volker/Nancy Kippax, 5657 Utrecht Road, Baltimore, MD 21206.

GALACTIC DISCOURSE 5 - is still looking for submissions of fiction, poetry and art. GD is an all-TREK genzine emphasizing character interactions and development. For more info SASE SATORI PRESS, 208 W Crow, Eureka IL 61530.

GUARDIAN - a mixed ST/SW fanzine. SASE for information on current issues including Guardian 5-Stormbrother (a full-length SW novel) to Mazeltough Press, PO Box 248, Wayzata, MN 55391.

IT TAKES TIME ON IMPULSE (ITTOI) - strictly Trek genzine. SASE for info to Harriett Stallings, PO Box 6023, Kansas City, MO 64110.

INSATIABLE CURIOSITY - A Leonard Nimoy zine. \$6.50 postpaid.

THE COMPLETE OMICRON CETI III LYRIC BOOK - 50 filk songs. \$2.60 postpaid.

LEGEND'S END - by Martha Bonds. In the aftermath of a Galactic War, Kirk Spock and McCoy must deal with devastation and find a way to survive.

Contains mature subject matter (no K/S). Completely illustrated by Suzan Lovett. \$12.65 postpaid. For above three - checks payable to Martha Bonds, Kalomi Press, 5905 Yorkwood Rd, Baltimore, MD 21239.

TACS - a K/S calendar with 13 attractive full-page illustrated prints depicting the many faceted (& many universed) K/S relationship and reflecting the months they represent. Age statement required. \$10.00 postpaid (first-class), \$8.00 in person.

KINDRED SPIRITS - A proposed K/S zine with stories from the series through alternate universes. Writing contest, and half-tone art. Special front/back cover and centerfold by Tacs. Deadline for submissions is September 1984. Age statement required. \$8.00 deposit plus SASE. For above two, checks/SASE to C. Swoboda, 4001 Hamilton Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21206.

NOME - planning to reprint Nos. 1 and 2 if there is enough response. SASE for info on these and current issues (incl. Broken Images, a full-length novel) to Barbara L. Storey, 445 E. 86th Street, New York, NY 10028 (age statement)

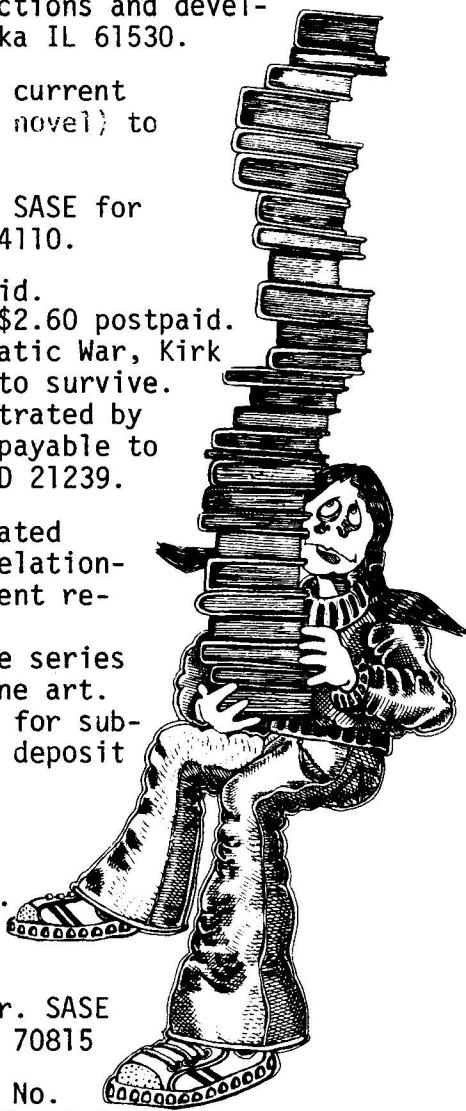
ODYSSEY - A genzine primarily focusing on McCoy's character. SASE for info to Ingrid Cross, 12528 Cate Ave., Baton Rouge, LA 70815

SECURITY CHECK - a zine spotlighting the Chekov character. No. 7 will feature an interview with & introduction by Walter Koenig!

Stories include Invisible Enemies by Sarie McBride, A Day in My Life, by Brenda Gibson. \$6.50 postpaid. Foreign orders: write for info. SASE for info and orders to: Joy Baker, 49 Grant Street, Ft. Thomas, KY 41075.

VAULT OF TOMORROW 6 - a ST genzine. Includes stories and poetry by LaCroix, Eierman, Syck, Cole, Ridener, James, McChesney & Crispin (written as part of program for Shore Leave VI). Artwork by Lovett, Cole, Swoboda, Moon, Cash & Decker, Color Cover by Lucy Synk. 248 pp. Offset. Perfect Bound. \$11.65 BK RT SP HNDG. Marion McChesney, 3429 Chestnut Avenue., Baltimore, MD 21211

MIND MELD #2 is still accepting contributions with a planned February, 1985 publication date. Tentative deadline for written material is October, 1984.





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